

For some, the land is not enough.



IN GOLDEN WATERS

Stories from the Seastead

A Something Awful Book

OZYRANDIAS

By Frozen Horse

*I met a traveller from an azure sea
Who said: `A raised middle finger of steel
Stands on the coral... Near that, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear --
"My name is Ozyrandias, job-creator:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and fuck off!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level waves stretch far away.'*

Cover by John Donovan Liver

CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Questions Are a Burden, Answers a Prison	5
Mortal Combat	7
The Fist Step	9
The End Yet Rises	11
REVOLution	12
War By Any Other Means	13
Winners And Losers	15
The Glory That Was Libertaria	30
We Built This City	36
Reinventing The Wheel	42
A Mirror, Markedly	50
The Riddle Of Gold	54
Fiat Sing-Song	55
The Randarillion	60
Ethics, Shmethics	62
The Taste	67
One Small Cog	75
Plenty Of Room At The Bottom	78
Fireside Stories	80
Where Simians Dare	81
Bottom Rung	84
A Fistful Of Fiat	86
The Sun That Walks	89
Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad	92
Epilouge	98
Debt, Libertarian Style	101

Kashiro's Day Off	109
The Rise, Fall and Rise of Kashiro	119
Modern Love	137
Still Humping The American Dream	140
Oh, To Live In Such Times	145
The Offered Branch	151
The Other End Of The Rainbow	165
The Randwich Horror	170
The Ties That Bind	177
The Ground Gained	181
Gods Among Men	189
Leviathan	206
The Ice-Box	212
Hurtling Into Darkness	219
This Is How The World Ends	224
Burning Bridges	232
Exit Stage Right	235

Foreword

By Erenthal

"A equals A, motherfucker!"

Alan Greenspan, *The Chronicles of Riddick*

The book you are holding in your hand is the collective effort of lots people, voluntarily donating their time and effort to entertain their fellow man. Ironically, that makes this the absolute anti-thesis of Seasteading.

Though we can rest safely, secure in our knowledge that the fevered dreams of the Seasteaders will never come to fruition, the stories contained herein will still horrify and amuse you. Not in any particular order, mind you.

So, fire up your blimp and uncork that bottle of Dew. You are about to enter a world constrained by no ethics, people constrained by no humanity, and an ideology unfettered by reality.

New York, 9/10 2011

Questions are a Burden, Answers a Prison

By Krasniy Prospekt

Anatoly lit a cigarette, his first real cigarette in years, and took a long drag, closing his eyes as the nicotine surged through his body. He leaned back in his chair, allowing himself a half smile as memories of the past, good memories for once, came surging forward. His reflection was short lived, however.

“Anatoly Pavlovich, please...” interrupted one of the men

Anatoly opened one eye, then both, to glare at the man for interrupting his nostalgic musings. The men in front of him, three “United Nations Delegates,” were impatient to hear his story, yet he yearned only to forget it. The men were surely intelligence men, he mused. The man on the right, whose Russian was flawless, was surely SVR, the tall one pacing back and forth CIA, and the quiet man, also smoking, perhaps French DSGE. Their affiliation or even names mattered little to Anatoly, but their interest did immensely.

“What, exactly,” Anatoly asked, taking another long drag on the cigarette, “do you want to know?”

“Everything,” said the American man as he turned on his heel, impatiently. “About the slaves, the drugs, the experiments, the revolt, and your escape. We want to know what happened out there, and why nobody tried to stop it. Why we couldn’t stop it!”

Anatoly smirked at the man’s impatience and typical American arrogance. “We were going... No,” he paused, correcting himself, “We believed we were going to change the world. We could solve all the problems of society by creating our own, far away from corrupted politics and imperial spheres of influence. It was a grand scheme, but not one without... prob-

lems.” He paused to savor the last of his cigarette before stubbing it out.

“Continue,” probed the SVR man, with a gentle nod.

“We were tired of our governments taking what was rightfully ours, the fruits of our labor, and handing it out to the peasants, the dregs of society. We were told to be complacent in a system that punished those with initiative, and rewarded the weak and the lazy. We were the kulaks of our generation, and we had enough.”

The Frenchman and the American exchanged concerned glances, but the SVR man simply nodded for him to go on, so Anatoly further indulged.

“I had amassed a fair fortune through the growing free market after the collapse of the communist government, and was able to invest in a project I read about of the internet, which intrigued me greatly.”

“Don’t try to downplay your mafia connections,” warned the CIA man, “we know exactly how you got your money.”

Anatoly merely raised an eyebrow quizzically, while the SVR man suppressed a chuckle. “Taking advantage of the free market in my country, may appear the same as being part of the mafia in yours, although the comparison is part of the reason we desired to leave mainstream society. So we decided to build a city, a city of like minded people, tired of government intervention and influence, where the strong are rewarded and weak are punished. We built Libertaria with our blood, sweat, and tears; and we called it our home.”

The Frenchman proffered another cigarette, which Anatoly gladly accepted, before finally speaking up. “So,” he asked, “you were one of the original investors?”

“Yes,” replied Anatoly, “Myself, the Americans Thiel and Patri, my business partner and friend Vasiliy Yevgenivich, and Jacques Gotin, the pharmaceutical heir. We were the ones who raised the capital to build Libertaria, anchor it in

the Atlantic, and attracted the first wave of inhabitants. We were there from the beginning, and,” he paused, reflectively, “until the end of the beginning...”

“Please, mon ami,” the DGSE man pushed, “tell us what went wrong.”

Anatoly stubbed out his cigarette, and looked the DGSE man in the eyes, moving from him to the others, their faces both incredulous to and captivated by his tale. He drew a breath and continued.

Mortal Combat

By Gotta Stay Fai

The islands crashed together, it was loud as hell. The piers broke and Jerry started shooting his cane laser blindly at the other island. He heard a scream and smiled. "I'm that good," he thought. A cane laser is like a normal walking cane but you twist the head and lasers come out of the other end. Even before the collapse researchers on our island have been able to do whatever they want since nobody gets mad when you experiment on slave girls or try to make weapons of mass destruction.

Jerry saw people jumping from their island to his. "That won't do," he said, and shot blue lasers at them. Then he heard a WOOOOOSH noise and saw red lasers. "Oh shit" said Jerry. Jerry heard stories about laser boomerangs from people that visited the other island. WOOOOOSH it went again and he felt a breeze against his head.

"HEY JERRRY" a voice said.

"Who are you, come out and fight!"

"HA HA HA HA HA!"

Then Jerry saw him come out from behind some rubble. It was Billy!

"You are a big dumb idiot, Billy!" yelled Jerry.

Jerry and Billy were worst enemies. They used to live on the same island but they made Billy leave because he was a jerk to everyone, especially Jerry.

"I'M BACK, STUPID TURD EATER! TRY EATING LASERS INSTEAD OF TURDS!" Billy threw the laser boomerang.

“Ha, I dodged your boomerang, dummy!” Jerry said, but Billy just laughed.

“HA HA, THE THING ABOUT BOOMERANGS IS...”

Jerry stopped smiling.

“...THEY COME BACK WHEN YOU THROW THEM! IN A MINUTE YOU’LL GET HIT BY MY RED LASERS!”

Jerry heard a WOOOOOSH noise but dodged the lasers at the last second.

“You’re finished, Billy!” Jerry spun his laser cane and a blue laser cut Billy right in half. Guts went everywhere. A guy that was watching puked!

Jerry smiled. “Looks like you’re half the man you thought you were, Billy.”

THE END

The First Step

By Leovinus

I am Patri Friedman, and I am here to ask you a question. Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his- whoa, that was a big one. That was... it's just a tropical rainstorm, actually, people have been saying hurricane but... no, no, it's fine. We're fine. Anyway. Sweat of his brow.

'No,' says the man in Washington, 'it belongs to the poor.' Welfare. Welfare's what I'm talking about there.

'No,' says the man in the Vatican, 'it belongs to God.' Churches, yeah? Grrrr. Yeah.

'No,' says the man in Moscow, 'it belongs to everyone.' No, I... look, I can see people leaving in the back there. I know you're free to do so, but... a bit rude. It's... I don't know what you're even worried about, millions of dollars were spent to make sure this thing was solid as a rock. I mean, almost millions. We almost got enough money to put the "s" on there.

I rejected those answers. Instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose...

Fuck! Fuck, oh, shit. Shit, that hurts. Who built this fucking stage? There were only three people standing on this fucking thing! It's just a bit of wind, which asshole fucking built this? We should exile them. Price of freedom, okay? OK, I can do this from down here. It's symbolic, in a way, that I can make this speech from your level.

A city where the artist would not fear the censor. I know. I

know. We're up to our knees in seawater. I'm not going to try and deny that. I'm... look, this bit is the important bit, so let me finish this bit first.

Where the builder would not be bound by petty building codes. You think I can't hear you jeering. I can. I may not have a podium any more but I can damn well hear you. Private fucking medical care, alright? Nothing wrong with my ears. You might be thinking that your homes wouldn't now be filled with brine if they were up to so-called "code", but as the man said, you can't sacrifice liberty for a little temporary security in any circumstances, ever. That is a blanket rule.

Where the great would not be constrained by the small. This specifically in regards to the seats and plastic armrests on the planes we took to get here, which were bullshit.

And with the sweat of your brow, Seastead can become your instibblbl, mmfb bybbl....

The End Yet Rises

By UnkleDan

The sun rose over the charred remains of a floating platform. Acrid black smoke could still be seen drifting from the empty husk.

The morning sun brought a salty breeze across the ocean to the SeaStead Libterania I, flagship of the Independent Fleet. Libertania II and Freetopia had long since been lost to the waves.

Slowly, almost inhumanly slowly a human figure rose up from the ash. The blackened and battered form stretched out towards the first rays of daylight, grasping for any warmth.

Never again would the proud and independent nation command the high seas. Never again would any free commerce boats smuggle for liberty. The people here lived and died the way they loved: with a complete disregard for safety.

REVOLution

By SniperWoreConverse

John Gale stood defiantly in the life raft, sea spray in his stylishly handsome hair imperfectly mimicing his synth-gem lapel pin as the last of the setting sun's rays shone upon him

He was gripping the pistol with white knuckled determination as he looked at the holoreadout. "One charge left. Well, that's all I'll need to take you down, Gestalt, you and your whole Kultur."

As the sun began to set, it silhouetted the seasted, now under the craven Gestalt's control. "Muwaha, hahahaha, now that the ideological genius Gale is out of the picture, i have complete control of the seastead, and all I had to do was appeal to the slavish needs of the degenerate working class! Ingenious, my dear, how could I have done it without you?"

A smile slid out over the pirate's exotic, erotic, lips. "You couldn't have," she said. "Let's celebrate, with some of this."

She pulled a small bundle from between her curvaceous boobs. It was over 18 lines worth of mega-coke.

Meanwhile, Gale began working towards his vengeance.

War By Any Other Means

By Boogoose

Alan Frobisher, President of Frobisher Industries and Incorporated Fiefdoms, sat upon a throne of pure gold. His powerful brain-case rested on a sturdy arm, the mate of which ended in a hand which drummed restlessly on that ingot chair. A lesser seat of wood or fiat currency had no permanence, no real value beyond what was attributed by overweening governance. The Chair of the Chairman radiated power as well as an intoxicating yellow glimmer.

At each flank stood his two Vice Presidents, Goregreedy and Bonebreaker, pure bred heterochromic Alsatians. Before him stretched The Board, his inner circle of trusted advisers and by right of dominance, lesser Captains of Industries.

If they were Captains, let him be their Admiral, as each one had been bested by him in the bloody ring, that sacred combat ritual where two men entered, naked as the day they were born, equal but for how each man was armed. Their net worth in billiard balls, \$1,000,000 to a ball, wrapped in a silk sock.

Each man of the Board Alan had drubbed with his mighty overflowing wealth sack, that became greater engorged after each passing victory. Each man owed him fealty unto death or a competitive offer. Goregreedy growled, and fixed each of them with a murderous, two-tone stare.

Frobisher's marble scowl, held pursed like two great menhirs forced together by incredible geological pressure, parted like it is alleged the waters before Moses by those weak enough to resort to fairy tales and myth in order to justify their existence. The Board turned as one to hear their figurative godhead give testament.

"It is time" intoned Frobisher "that we do something about

the renegade Bitfarmers operating out of the Andrew Ryan Mall and Aquarium of Tomorrow. We should capture their wealth and use it to expand our own portfolios.”

“Besides, the heat from their immense servers shall be put to good use by our womenfolk. Swords must be forged, bread must be baked, and a great golden statue of me must be cast, the trickle down wealth effect of which will greatly improve our worker’s morale.”

Thus began the Hostile Takeover III, a bloody conflict that threatened to shake Objectia to its very core, except those areas that profited heavily from the ensuing arms trade.

Winners and Losers

By SpaceDrake

*You can get much further with a kind word and a gun than you can with a
kind word alone.*

-Al Capone, as quoted in Forbes, October 1986

The sun rose over the floating mass of metal which drifted, slowly, on the waves. Where exactly it was in the world didn't really matter; it simply was, to many on land an eye-sore, to some the promised land, and to most of its residents, hell.

The sun rose and shone on block after block of corrugated metal, old ships welded haphazardly together, shipping containers which were now used as containers of human misery, slapdash constructions where drugs were made, experiments of dubious medical value were performed, and a hundred other activities which those who dwelled on land didn't allow.

But then the rays of the rising sun struck something else entirely - a tower which rose from the center of the platform.

The lowest floors of the tower looked somewhat like many of the other "buildings" on the platform, although some of the other buildings closest to the tower were in a state of at-least-decent repair; even so, there were broken windows, scorch marks and signs of looting. Even then, a trained eye would still notice that the actual structural supports were well-cared for and that no damage to the actual building itself was being tolerated.

And then, as you went up, the building got more and more impressive. Instead of broken glass and burned-out rooms,

you had reflective glass windows, little verandas with plants, banners hanging from some parts of it, proclaiming the name and slogan of various companies. The top twenty floors of the 50-odd-storey building gleamed like a diamond, compared to the rest of the city - meticulously cleaned glass and polished metal, not a sign of corrosion or wear anywhere. It was almost alien among the decay and filth of the rest of the man-made island.

And it was from the very top of this tower, from the penthouse apartment that made up a not-insubstantial portion of the top floor, that Tina smiled as she looked down on the rest of the city. Her city, one might say. She'd call it a pleasant smile, one which came from satisfaction at all she'd accomplished. Most others would likely call it the sort of smile you see on a shark.

She was actually reflected slightly in the glass of the window. A little apt, she thought, as she was in a bit of a self-reflective mood this morning. She was going to be dealing with one of the last remaining obstacles to her control over The Island today, one way or the other (and she suspected it would be "the other", as it had been so many other times) and it felt like a good time to indulge in a little navel-gazing.

She couldn't help but chuckle a little - the huge majority of the land-bound would find the full story of her path to power completely horrific, but it still amazed her how natural it had all seemed to her. After all, all she'd really done was simply do the same things many of those who had risen to power had done over the course of human history.

She turned from the window, and looked over her opulent living quarters - the piano in one corner, the massive 60" television (and thanks to her having an actual satellite antenna and a subscription to one of the worldwide land-based sat networks, it was actually worth something) on the wall before the wonderfully-soft lounge-sofa, even a fully-stocked

kitchen.

Granted, she was one of the few people on the island who didn't need to cook for herself (and even rarer, she was one of the very few people who could be sure any food prepared for her was perfectly edible), but she kept the kitchen around in part to remind herself of where she had come from, and that the "self-reliance" that so many of the founders of this man-made island nation had crowed on about included actually being able to create and provide for oneself. Having an excuse to keep an emergency supply of knives helped, too... and god damn if sometimes simply making yourself a sandwich or something wasn't the most satisfying sensation in the world.

She passed her hand over the marble surface of the kitchen, her eye catching on the faint tracing along the sides of her palm and fingers; the only real giveaway that her hand wasn't natural. She smiled again, clenching her fist; it wasn't just her arm, but all four of her limbs and their connecting pectoral and buttock muscles which were artificial. They gave five-foot-six Tina the proportional strength of five body-builders, and unlike the juicers and synth-whores and dragon wannabes who writhed out on the Plats, these were properly integrated into her body and, especially when clothed, looked and acted indistinguishably from the real thing. They were the very best money could buy, and were one of the things some Landers came out here to spend "fiat scrip" on, that precious government-backed money that really made the wheels turn out here.

Tina had gotten hers for free, of course; recompense for giving the BioSeed scientists their little haven of horrors to experiment in. (And of course, they had known damn well that they had to give her the proper best with no strings attached, or the consequences would be dire.) She didn't have to use them for their original purpose all that often anymore, but they just might see use again today. And even then, being able

to perform feats of strength equivalent to bench-pressing six hundred pounds had other practical applications outside of her “leadership” position.

Rapping her knuckles on the countertop, there was also the ever-so-handy fact that her limbs were now completely immune to pain, she mused as the grin on her face grew slightly wider.

Turning from the kitchen, she looked out over her penthouse again. The entertainment, the art, the window out onto the decaying, corrupt, incredible mass that was the island - her island - it was all the result of a lot of hard work. A lot of blood, sweat, and tears.

Which was to say, she owned it because she had murdered the previous owner.

She chuckled. Murdered was such a nasty word, conjuring up images of Hannibal Lecter-like impassioned stabbing, blood everywhere and a savage attack on another living human being. And, admittedly, she HAD murdered a fair few people with her own hands (first her natural ones, and then, with considerably greater ease, her augmented ones), including the previous owner of this very room, the former “High Captain of Industry” on the island. But many other times, she had at least been “civilized” about it; even when she’d killed the previous Captain, the CEO and President of RandTek, her former employer, she’d shot him in the back of the head with a S&W Model 500 (which she kept by her bed to this day).

That was an instant death; a bit messy, perhaps, but merciful and quick. He’d barely even realized what was going on; she’d walked behind him during a conversation while he was sitting at his desk, focused on something on his computer screen, and she’d pulled out the revolver and fired it in one smooth motion, while talking, so swiftly that he’d never had time to even hear it or react.

She hadn’t been nearly so clean or kind with many of her

competitors - first as a member of a security team for Raza Security Solutions, then as a secteam head, then as head of Raza itself, and now as CEO of RandTek Incorporated. All positions she had climbed to following the deaths of the previous occupants - the first one a mix of serendipity and tragedy, the other two being of a rather more “practical” nature. Death through a mixture of convenience and necessity.

She couldn’t help but shake her head as she wandered back toward the window, looking out on the now-fully-sunlit “city” and sprawling mass of desperate humanity who lived, labored, loved and fairly often died in the shadow of Rand Tower. If there was one thing that still absolutely amazed Tina, twenty years into the “grand experiment” that was The Island, it was the behavior and thought patterns of the original founders.

There had been some actual forethought, brilliance and even vision involved - the multi-tier ballast system which kept the central island afloat and stable even in severe weather was a marvel of engineering which even Lander governments copied for use in other floating installations that were somewhat more directly chained to land, for example, and away from things like “regulation” and “morality” and “worker safety”, quite a few of the Captains had cobbled together some impressive power, water reclamation, and hydroponic food solutions, never mind the advances in things like human augmentation that could be pioneered without the watchful eye of societal morality around - but to this day Tina simply could not believe how completely stupid so many of those men had been.

And it had been literally all caucasian-aryan men, back at the start - an expression of “the patriarchy” at its most arrogant peak. Tina always took a little bit of savage joy in the fact that it had been a little girl from a mixed-heritage background that had brought so many of them down.

For, you see, one of The Island's dirty little semi-secrets was that easily ninety percent of the original founders were dead at this point. The very fact that The Island didn't really have a set name - Libertalia, Libertopia, Randistan, or maybe The Tenth Circle if you were a Lander, particularly a Uner - was just one expression of why they were all dead.

Somehow, all of these rich, wealthy men - some of who were actually brilliant or visionary in some way, some of whom were just rich because of inheritance or because they were bastards in the boardroom - virtually all of them hadn't actually understood how social dynamics worked. At all.

In retrospect, Tina mused, it was obvious, given the deconstruction of social programs that many of them had advocated at the start of the century back on land, trying to turn actual land countries into bigger versions of The Island, and their actual confusion when large segments of the Lander population of the time had bitten back ferociously after a while.

And so, having learned nothing, they set out to sea... where they built the kind of "society" they'd envisioned and were then completely taken by surprise when they found the actually couldn't control it.

Back on Land, after all, you had police and firefighters and courts and even governments, really, all because people ultimately wanted to live together in relative peace and be together with one another. The libertarians who had founded The Island and its smaller cousins had, for whatever reason, forgotten that this arrangement even existed. They and their forefathers had been rich for so long, been the beneficiaries of societal protection from disaster for their entire living memories, that they assumed it was the natural state of things everywhere.

And that's why so many of them were caught unawares when others tried to murder them, openly or otherwise.

Unlike Land, there had been no actual “society” on The Island when it was founded - just unfettered avarice presented as the final virtue. But due to the scorn of knowledge and “intellectualism” the founding libertarians held and espoused, it seems none of them bothered to read a little book by Machiavelli that detailed exactly what happened when the only thing binding people to you was money; that is, if your underlings can enrich themselves by taking your life and position, and there’s nothing to really stop them from doing so, why wouldn’t they?

Their sociological blindness also contributed to another problem that led to their deaths: after a while, their murders became virtually necessary because their total lack of understanding of how a functional society worked meant that, as leaders, many of the old “Captains of Industry” were completely terrible at actually leading and creating a functional community unit, never mind a society.

It was one thing to not want to tax in order to fund a communal firefighting unit. It was another thing entirely to express actual confusion at the idea that you needed to help import basic firefighting and prevention equipment or the entire Island would blow up.

These things Just Happen, you see. The Free Market will provide such goods if the people really need them; the Captains don’t need to bother with such “details”.

Naturally, a lot of the worst of them were also quite bad at even running their own corporations - those who had gotten wealthy due to tax breaks and plundering their company’s coffers dry as “replacement” CEOs before literally bailing out to find another company to plunder. Their mentality was really more like the pirates who had sometimes attacked The Island in the early days - but they were so socially myopic that they barely understood how to interact meaningfully with others.

This was where people like Tina had entered the picture. They weren't quite all from "the street" or lower-income backgrounds, but Tina knew that most of them were.

You see, there was one part of Lander society that worked somewhat like this, like capitalism unfettered: the drug business.

Tina's father, who had worked hard as a college student to get a master's degree, found himself unable to get work anywhere during the Little Depression (which they called the "Great Recession" back then) and so had turned to selling drugs to make ends meet... and little Tina had seen first-hand how that world worked, as her daddy actually got fairly wealthy and was then murdered brutally when he wasn't careful.

That's what she had seen and learned growing up: that nobody gives you power, that real power was something you had to take... or at least "convince" someone to give to you.

But that also meant that the "power" was nothing in a vacuum, that you actually needed a functional society for it to mean dick-all.

And so, one by one, the founders were picked off - sometimes by other greedy bastards who simply had a gun at the right time and nobody to oppose them at that minute (and they didn't tend to last long themselves), and other times by people who felt the need to get rid of them so that The Island could actually survive and become something functional.

Some of them were murdered outright - shot in the head, stabbed in the street like Caesar (another example the founders should've paid attention to), strangled in bed by "lovers" who were planted to do anything but make love - but others were simply "disappeared" or perished due to "accident" or "disease".

Granted, a decent few of them actually did die to accident or disease, including that one memorable occasion when one of

the founders gave a televised address and keeled over on the podium mid-speech, dead from a mutant strain of cholera.

The very need to prevent that had spurred many of the New Captains forward - the “enlightened self-interest” so espoused by the Randians gave way to the simple self-interest inherent in survival, not just for food and water, but against disease and disaster.

All of the New Captains had been brought over as workers - some as armed guards like Tina (the story of how she came to work with Raza on The Island was something of an epic in and of itself), some as low-level managers (who were distressingly uncommon at first), some even rose from the lowest dregs of the Plats, from the Welders and the skilled factory men, people who had practical knowledge of how to do things. People who had the skills the founders had never possessed.

And, of course, the second and even third generation of leaders were ruthless to each other as well - “elimination of competition” having been established as the way up the corporate ladder, potshots at one another were commonplace and “mergers” often happened after one leader or another met an untimely end.

The slaughter among the elite actually subsided after a few years, however; partly because those who were left, like Tina, were far better at surviving than those who’d already been culled, but also because those who were left were much more keyed in to the importance of keeping things functional so that they didn’t have to slink back to the Land, where nearly all of them would already be wanted for various crimes committed on - or due to - The Island.

And so they actually began to put together something like a society. The doctors were enticed to The Island with promises of experimentation, so long as they also made sure to keep the labor force reasonably healthy and gave proper “dis-

counts” to the higher-ups who could live in a place like Rand Tower; many of the security companies were rolled into the larger conglomerates like RandTek, including Tina’s old outfit Raza, who then at least kept the Inner Island reasonably safe while the “Debt Solutions” specialists kept the Plat-proles in line; the emergency response companies were likewise “incentivized” into providing timely response to problems on most of the island in exchange for various things (often including access to young, nubile girls, the thought of which made Tina grind her teeth) while still being allowed to exploit the Plats as they wished... so long as disaster out there didn’t endanger the Main Island and its precious ballast, power and sustenance systems.

These weren’t “taxes”, naturally. They were “vital business relationships” that “drove the engine of [whatever the marketers called The Island that day]’s industry forward”.

And it was Tina who had arranged quite a bit of this. Not all of it, of course - a place like The Island had quickly become too big for any one person to manage every aspect of - but especially once she’d gotten into the position of head of Raza and thus one of the high-up people at RandTek, she’d been able to act as organizer for a lot of it.

Getting the necessities set up, making most of the players involved play nice with each other (or at least not shoot at first sight), helping to set up the enticement networks to lure more proles to the Plats as a labor force and also to get some of the actual talent off of the Land to work on, maintain and even improve The Island’s more complicated features... and she’d also helped to set up the revenue streams. She was the one who’d really pushed for the idea of allowing the medical companies, in particular the aug crews, to set up shop both in the Inner Island and out in the Plats, and letting them experiment as they wished, so long as they didn’t kill everyone on the island.

After a while, RandTek even lived up to the “Tek” part of its name and began their own research, development and production - and, combined with the sale of drugs, both “Land-legal” and otherwise, that’s where the majority of The Island’s real money came from.

Island scrip and “non-fiat” money might appeal to the hardcore Randists, but what really kept The Island alive was the flow of government scrip that came into The Island from helping the biomed and aug corps with their business. Some of it was rent, some of it was simply a “business relationship”.

So long as the Lander corps didn’t chop the arms off of everyone on The Island, Tina was more than happy to take their money.

And so an actual society sprang up on The Island - security, emergency services, something that at least kind of resembled Lander society. But there was still one crucial difference: there were no courts of law, no true central government to appeal to if something went wrong. If you could off your boss and get the rest of a crew to follow you, then you could... you just better hope the “business partners” don’t mind dealing with a new face.

And if you lived out on the Plats? Well, this was the land of no gods, so God couldn’t help you. There sure were masters on The Island, though, and the Plat-proles were at their mercy unless some prole could somehow work his way up into a position of some kind of power.

Tina didn’t need to worry about that, though. She’d worked hard, occasionally killed harder, and now she was the one at the very top of The Island’s food chain.

She was, she mused, either directly or indirectly involved in every major economic action that took place on The Island every day.

Others might’ve built The Island, but The Island survived thanks to her. And there was no one left to oppose her, not

even her former boss, who had been the final obstacle to everything, with his objection to the “incentives” being offered to the medical and emergency crews. That smelled too much of taxation, he had said. He had been a Randian purist to the end. He wanted Libertalia to be “truly” free market... without understanding what that meant. He’d been THE original founder, really, scion of a famous economic family who had poured vast amounts of his own wealth into The Island’s creation. He’d been the original winner among The Island’s vast sea of humanity, the one who’d built it.

And, when he stood in the way of The Island’s survival, Tina hadn’t even hesitated. She’d shot him and disposed of the body in the bowels of the Inner Island, where only a few maintenance men and Plat-proles went and where nobody would really think twice about one more dead body.

And, having gotten the support of everyone important in advance, she became CEO of RandTek. The illusion of the old Captain remaining as “President” was maintained, though; he hardly ever left Rand Tower anyway, and so his being out of sight while Tina did all of the public business appeared to be business as usual without panicking the “investors”, especially the Landers, too greatly (though most people of real importance had a good idea of what’d happened to the old master of that penthouse).

That had been nearly a decade ago. The thing that made really Tina laugh now in retrospect was that, in a lot of ways, she was the sort of person Rand had espoused as being the future.

The great irony was that she hadn’t even really read any of Rand’s stuff - all she really knew was that Rand was a traumatized Russian who didn’t really believe in human good after seeing the old Communists in action.

Well, Tina hoped old Rand was proud of Tina’s accomplishments, because she was the Captain of Industry in the “uto-

pia” built in Rand’s name.

No, she wasn’t just the “Captain” of industry. She was the Commodore, the General, the frickin’ Admiral of Industry. And as far as she could see, there was nobody who could topple her. The Lander governments didn’t greatly interfere with The Island now, like they had in the very early days, because now the biomed corps found The Island far, far too valuable to blockade or destroy, so their lobbyists made sure that The Island never suffered great economic sanction so long as Tina could keep the “criminal element” from exporting too much violence (and make sure that the rich, and half the time government, Landers who came out to have illicit aug work done or to buy friggin’ crates of Hypermeth or Le Grande Acid made it home safe and sound).

The pirates didn’t mess with The Island either, because it was too damn big at this point to be worth risking it, what with nearly everyone armed to some degree; sure, when The Island was less than ten thousand idealistic Randians with silly discount-club-bought “rifles” that didn’t work half the time, the idea that the Great Independent White Man could fight off the Colored Pirate Hordes was kind of laughable, but that’s exactly why crews like Tina’s old gang had been brought in initially... and now that The Island was home to over half a million generally-unhappy people, all of whom were armed to at least some degree, only a madman would think of attacking it with the smaller watercraft most pirates tended to favor.

Most of the time, they docked peacefully in the Plats these days - if anything, The Island had gone from a target to a port of call too valuable for them to risk damaging.

That said, Tina had also made clear to them that they couldn’t set up base on The Island permanently (in part by ripping off the lower jaw of one of their leaders and asking if the rest understood exactly what she meant) - she wasn’t

so stupid as to risk pissing the Lander governments off that much. Even if the pirates were some of her best customers these days.

And the other CEOs, the other grand “Captains” whom were the darlings of the constant waves of neophyte Randians who showed up every now and then (only to usually end up among the dregs in the Plats)? They were the biggest risk, sure, but most of them were more or less in her pocket - she was the devil they knew, and she could arrange to keep most of them safe, while at the same time being quite damn sure that none of them could organize an effective-enough attack on her to bring her down. There were still a few holdouts, yes. But she was going to take care of the biggest problem today.

So let some of the Landers rage, especially those UN twits like that shit-eating Frenchman who showed up with great pageantry in the Plats every now and again, making a big show of leading some people “home”. The sections they “disposed of” were usually replaced in a month by more desperate people looking for a new life - and a few even managing to find it, with the rest feeding The Island’s industry in... various ways.

Out here, Tina ruled just about all of The Island... officially a CEO, privately a Poofy Flag Admiral of Industry, and... what did a few of the Landers call her? That name taken in part from that old videogame?

“Queen Bitch of Libertopia”? Well... let them call her that. She was the one who actually had The Island.

The sun was well over the horizon now. The Island was lurching into action - another day of drug manufacturing, experimentation, and general exploitation and misery. The sun shone down on rust, iron and decay.

Except for those who lived at the top. In gleaming Rand Tower. Those who had gotten to the top by every means necessary when a society decides to throw society away.

With one last glance out the window, Tina Gunther turned and walked for the closet next to the door out of the penthouse, grabbing her coat - which contained her other magnum .500.

It was going to be a busy day.

The Glory That Was Libertaria

By Shadeoses

What is a good life? To live without fear and pain, to derive joy from your work? To be respected and loved by those around you and share each others successes and failures? I had a good life. Until Libertaria.

A quote that has stuck with me goes, “A ship at sea is its own world. To be the captain of a ship is to be the unquestioned ruler of that world and requires all of the leadership skills of a prince or minister.”

That describes the lone ship well. You have but what you carry with you, a limited crew, and only your determination to survive when fate tests you with disaster. With the limited resources available, a deckhand getting a tooth infection is as great a concern as an approaching typhoon. It is the norm to have interminable lengths of boredom, only to be struck by great fortune or ruin. A pump may fail and require emergency replacement at great cost, or a contract might be fulfilled with a generous bonus.

I live for these moments as others do, though we secretly know in our hearts that we play the most dangerous game of life and death.

I gamble with not only my life but the crew under me, who have entrusted me to keep them safe between ports. Making a crucial decision has always weighed heavily on me, knowing that my hubris or greed could harm them just as too much caution would abandon opportunity.

As an older, wiser fool, I can look back and see where I went wrong. Usually it was something well outside my control, like an unexpected storm or faulty seals on a shipment. But

I cannot blame anyone but myself for what happened at Libertia.

As the great decade of the 40's went on, life on the seas became ever more viable for those such as myself. With the upheavals of the African Fires winding down into a series of unstable governments and general corporate imperialism, the opportunities for someone to trade on the edge of the law were greater than ever. While there are many demons on the waves, I endeavoured to not become one of them. If at all possible I would not deal with the worst warlords and pirates, nor would I raid and backstab my fellow mariners. Trading in drugs, slaves and worse was also taboo, as it would mean treading a slippery slope and dangerous bedfellows.

Perhaps that makes me a romantic fool, but a fool with few enemies and a good reputation is something more should aspire to be.

Beyond that I was eminently flexible, working for individuals, corporations and governments. Most jobs were light shipping for smaller organisations, moving materials and equipment along the coastlines and between continents.

With corporations it was usually prefab housing, mining tools, desalination rigs, that sort of thing. My ship, *Illustria*, was fast and reliable but lacked all that much cargo space. Work found us by reputation as often as we sought it out, and with a great web of contacts we were rarely idle.

Governments sometimes called me on an unofficial basis, but individuals always had an itch I could scratch. I've hosted a cruise for the royalty of Indo-Malay, shipped a full load of flat-packed Ikea furniture to a planned community in the Puntland Economic Zone, and delivered a single giant stuffed toy bear to a birthday party in Sevastopol.

These jobs tended to pay well, and the novelty of them kept things interesting while offering trophies and plenty of black-mail material.

It was one of these strange jobs that led to Libertaria, in a roundabout way. It started with a disaster off the coast of Africa in which we had to abandon our cargo in order to escape with our lives. Without our payment or our cargo of rare metals and latex, our finances were already stressed. Making matters worse was the price of repairing the damage done to the hull and injuries to the crew during our escape from Isla de los Dragones, as it was known before the world's militaries got off their collective asses and destroyed it. That is a story for another day, however.

After repairs and replacing crew, *Illustria* was functional but had no purpose. We had nearly no cash, and there seemed to be an oversaturation of traders plying the usual routes. In order to survive we spent the next few months doing petty jobs while waiting for our big break.

The last and most promising was a delivery for a colonel in the Obuasi Protectorate, trying to establish himself as a benefactor of the people. I caught news of his project only after the best items had already been bid off, leaving me with options that my ship was simply too small to handle profitably. While others were transporting computer parts, medicine and foreign labourers for him, I was left with several tons of plascrete. An important building material for whatever the hell he was planning, but it was barely a profit making venture. Such was my desperation at the time, I had no choice if I wanted to keep buying repairs and fuel.

We were approaching the coast when the news came in over satellite: Colonel Nsia dead, shot in his bedroom by bodyguard. The details were sketchy but everyone on the bridge knew that we were fucked. All the money we had was sunk into a cargo nobody would want.

Silence reigned as we slowly entered Port Accra. My second, Kim, spoke up first.

"We're fucked, boss."

"I know. Maybe we can still unload it on the locals. Ryu, go ashore and try picking up any construction shops that won't mind buying our load. Kim, go through our Ivory contacts with me, there should be someone in West Africa who'll help us out for a favour."

I stood at the rails and watched as Ryu left to trawl the local channels, but I could already hear the pop of gunfire and smell fresh smoke drifting over the horizon. There was nothing more for us here.

"Damn." I sighed.

"Yeah, boss. Libertaria." Kim said, nodding ruefully.

All the world knew of Libertaria in some form. Such a thing could not help but become a part of the public consciousness. For sea rats like myself it was a far more powerful concept, no matter how much one hoped it would sink and disappear forever. It was part Atlantis, part Flying Dutchman, source of superstitious tales of wonder and horror known across the seas. Sometimes it disappeared for days, even months at a time only to reappear in a completely different location. I try to remain level-headed about it, but it truly felt like a ghost haunting my steps when it did that. Last reported in the Indian Ocean, it somehow avoided detection for weeks and now it was a few hundred miles off of West Africa.

I looked around at my loyal crew. There was nothing but grim determination in their faces.

"We're with you, boss." It was little Jim the engine rat. He rarely spoke up. "It wasn't your fault them dragons attacked the drop-point. You took care and got us out of there in one piece, can't say the same about many other captains I've been with."

There was murmured assent from around the room. I was lucky to have such a crew. But did I deserve it?

Finding Libertaria was actually easier than I expected. It

was broadcasting a beacon, perhaps an attempt to draw traffic much like ourselves. Though it was not yet in sight, the knowledge that we were drawing closer created an atmosphere not unlike that which precedes a storm front.

The crew were ready for trouble, all non-essential tasks abandoned in favour of waiting nervously while clutching weapons. Old NATO assault rifles made up the majority, though some had after-market Chinese rocket launchers or crewed the Korean MG nests. Many would scoff at such a shabby set up, but it had proven itself effective against all manner of foe encountered on the waves. I could only hope that it would prove enough.

Even with it still over the horizon, we began to encounter proof of Libertaria's existence. Pieces of junk and garbage began to appear with increasing frequency, and we had to slow down to ensure we weren't hulled by a deceptively tough fragment. The tension on board rose higher, pierced by the intermittent banging sounds at the waterline. With every impact someone would shudder or close their eyes briefly. Soon enough we began to smell it as well. A reek began to permeate the air, so similar to the chemicals and sewerage that distinguished the worst slums. The sea lost its deep blue hue and took a sickly brown sheen, the flotsam encrusted by foul scummy bubbles. Dead fish and birds began to appear, along with more unsavoury or unidentifiable forms.

The tower rose above the horizon, the midday sun glinting off its precious metal walls. It sat at the center of the island, rising far above it and anchoring the disparate constructions with its immense weight. It had many names among those who plied the sea, but I knew what it was called by those under its shadow.

The Libertarium.

Calling ahead to coordinate the docking, we were guided

between patches of hazardous garbage and broken-off fragments of the superstructure. Now we began to see humans for the first time, camping on the largest of these free-floating islands. A few canoes and outboards also weaved between sites, giving our comparatively huge craft a wide berth. Everyone was absolutely filthy and watched with a mixture of curiosity and calculation. I was reminded of the extensive shanty-towns that splay out across the waters of Malay, but they were anchored to the shoreline. This place was but a whirling collection of wreckage drifting across the ocean.

Instead of approaching one of the many ramshackle piers and platforms that sprouted from the edge of the superstructure, our target was one of the large, well-maintained wharves. Our client was a big wheel in this place, one of the major corporate figureheads that ruled like a king. It was only his willingness to pay an exorbitant price for my materials that had drawn me here.

After witnessing the stained and broken structures dominated the city, the cool white form of Platinum Egress seemed like an entirely different world.

Only the calculating looks on the dockworkers remained the same as they toiled about its polished surface. The unloading began without incident, and after taking a deep breath I stepped from one ship to another. Under the blank gaze of gas-mask clad sentries, I set foot upon the gleaming white hull of *Libertaria*.

We Built This City

By Fitzdraco

Senate committee hearing on seastead affairs.

January 19th, 2035

Evidence in the form of written works by one Carl Benswick
to his mother Rosemary Benswick.

Letter postmarked June 20th 2034 Pablo medium security
prison:

Hey Ma, it's Carl. I have some good news. I'm getting out of here. I can't believe it either, but this man from something call Dynamo float works was looking for workers with any kind of metal experience, bodywork, welding, anything. I applied and he told me he wanted to offer me a contract on the spot. Can you believe it. He says that in two years I can earn enough to buy out my contract and then stay on as a non-contract worker or I can buy back passage to the main land.

There was a lot in the contract and I remembered not to sign anything without a lawyer. Henshaw, you remember him he was my public defender, looked at it and told me that I needed to speak with a contract or business lawyer. He did tell me that my release would be legitimate under the workstead act of 2028, so as long as I'm not a fugitive I figure I'm golden.

Tell Billy his daddy loves him, and tell him that I have a job and I'm going to be home a lot sooner then anybody thought. When I get back I'm going

to be able to do it all right this time. That's what the Dynamo guy said, on the seasteed any man can make anything of himself.

Love ya ma, Carl.

P.S. Keep this quiet till I get back, something about a nondisclosure clause. Don't worry about this I gave 10\$ to have it dropped in the mail by the guard who gets us stuff.

The diary enclosed below belonged to one Carl Benswick. Arrested for grand theft auto and possession in 2032. He qualified for the seasteed program and was offered a contract under Dynamo floatworks.

June 30th, 2034

I'm not going to be able to write you much anymore ma, so I figured on keeping this diary and sending it when I could. I got here three days ago

Man this place is a mess. One of the Dynamo guys introduced me to our boss, some guy calling himself Rand Goodkind. He bitches more then my old roommate. He insists on being called Captain for some reason. Oh well it's only two years.

I also got my quarters, at least that's what they called it. It's a shipping container I'm sharing with thirty other guys. I have to sleep on the floor at the moment although once I've got seniority I can get a hammock. Lot of prison tattoos here, but everybody seems so tired they aren't going to start shit.

July 14th, 2034

Man the breeze died down a week ago and the stench is worse then anything I've ever smelt. Worse then that time Mrs. Evans septic tank blew up. They have us working all the time it seems. The more hours we get the money we make. It's not money yet, their paying us in something called script.

It's ok, they said there is an exchange if we want to buy gold or one of the other scripts. They say it can even be exchanged for something called fiat but nobody does it because it's useless so it's really hard to find. I figure I'd save up as much as I could and wait to see if I can find somebody with fiat, apparently it's the only thing the shipping companies that bring everything in and out will use.

Anyway the work is really hard. We're welding anything they bring in to extend the island. Have to be careful as well, watched two guys go over bored last week, had to listen to the Captain bitch about nobody being able to pay off their equipment debt.

July 30th, 2034

Got my first paycheck today, this motherfucker is ripping me off something fierce. Apparently I'm some kind of independent contractor which means I have to pay to provide my own tools. Nobody has tools so he rents the tools to us. Hell, after everything is said and done I barely have

enough to buy food this month. We also were billed for the loss of the two rigs that went over the edge when that a wave hit. Apparently in addition to being independent contractors we were incorporated and as a corporation we are responsible for the any losses that occur.

July 31st 2034

Got a hammock now, the floor was starting to leek something fierce and nobody could afford to rent a rig to fix it. We also lost eighteen people. A riot started when the company store doubled it's prices. They said it was in response to a flood of new money from all the workers that had been brought in.

I kept my head down, when the shooting started. The riot broke up fairly quickly once that happened. Anybody who was to wounded to walk was offered free burial service unless they had enough money to pay the doctor and somebody to take them there. Didn't matter they made us toss them into the ocean anyways.

August 3rd, 2034

Can you believe this, they billed the rest of us for not being able to maintain order inside our own company. That fucker Goodkind threatened to blackball all of us for breach of contract. He was pissed when Jerry told him it didn't matter since we weren't going anywhere anyway.

Goodkind turned to his one of his goons that followed him everywhere and got a fucking sword

out of a briefcase. Who the hell uses a fucking sword. He told Jerry that his honor had been tarnished and he demanded satisfaction.

He killed Jerry, just cut him down.

August 12th, 2034

We got a new batch of contractees, sad to say I'm very senior not that it matters much. Nobody bothers to warn them, our shipping container is bugged and we don't want to violate the nondisclosure.

I try to feel bad for the new guys sleeping in an inch of water, but I just can't feel much of anything anymore.

August 18th, 2034

We lost half our crew in the hurricane. Goodkind insisted on keeping us out there during the worst of it, something about keeping production up.

He was furious. None of us old timers were surprised. He even lost a bunch of equipment although not all of that went overboard. Greg thinks he can rig up the canisters to explode The plan happens tomorrow.

Found a crewman on the last cargo ship who will take this book to you Ma. He's nice, I offered him all fiat I had, apparently they just meant money, anyways I had 3\$ to give him. He didn't even take my money.

Intelligence that we have indicates there were two small uprisings in the four days following the last entry. Neither

caused any structural damage, however, in the action Rand Goodkind injured himself with a sword and lost his left leg to infection.

Reinventing the Wheel

By Kit Walker

Jack Gould stood on the prow of the S.S. Anthem, watching on as the Seastead Rrandania widened into view. Without turning, he addressed the crowd of fellow captains of industry who gazed on behind him.

“Today is a bright day for humanity. Here, on Rrandania, we shall set an example for the world to follow. Here, we will demonstrate for all the nay-sayers the strength of our convictions. Here, we will show them the truth of the Free Market, the prosperity that is born of the sweat of one’s brow and the toil of one’s hands, free of regulation, free to pursue wealth that is rightfully ours.”

The S.S. Anthem swept underneath one of the retractable bridges that connected two of the Seastead platforms. The whole complex was an array of seven hexagonal floating platforms mushrooming out over the Atlantic, connected by bridges that could be withdrawn in the event of a hurricane. The ship’s destination was a dock extending out from the central pillar.

“I know many of you have felt some doubt over the feasibility of the project over the last seven years, and if it wasn’t for a generous investment from the Koch brothers we may very well have never been able to follow through with it, like a socialist in the bedroom.” The crowd snickered. “But we are made of sterner stuff, and here we are at long last! The fruit of our brilliance, a testament to the virtue of entrepreneurial spirit, a shining beacon of hope, a love letter to the Queen of Business whose beliefs helped guide us here: Ayn Rand!” The crowd broke out in reserved applause, too busy pondering

their next business venture to allow an emotional display.

The boat docked, and one by one these perfect captains of industry, each more brilliant than the last, stepped off the S.S. Anthem and filed their through a portal that led inside the pillar. Jack Gould was the last to step off, sparing but a contemptuous glance back across the hundreds of nautical miles that now divided them to the communist, regulated, anti-corporatist, free market-hating hellhole that was America. Barack Obama would not be able to take his taxes anymore. He was a new man, and he was ready to show those bastards what a real genius of industry could do without limitations.

Upon entering the pillar, our captains of industry found a complex of passages that wound around the interior, connecting to the other docks. Further branching pathways led to cargo elevators that would bring food and other necessities topside to this, the residential platform.

All six other platforms were littered with factories and laboratories, where Randania would manufacture its exports and do their research and development. Surrounding those six was a loose collection of hydroponic farms - specially designed platforms that filtered out salt and retained the nutrients added to the brew that would in time be operated by imported farmhands and would supply all of Randania with the food it needed.

They made their way to the heart of the pillar, where a small group of elevators took them topside. Here they found themselves in the lobby of Rand Tower, the administrative center of all of Randania. This would be their base of operations, the offices from which our captains of industry would move the world. Outside its doors was the residential district, by all appearances a small excised two by two block segment straight from Manhattan. The finest penthouses were of course reserved for the founding minds of Randania.

The year was 2015. Jack Gould had just turned 25 years old. A graduate of Harvard, with a degree in economics and political science. Though he technically failed the majority of the courses he had enrolled in, the fact that he was able to buy off his professors into giving him passing grades confirmed that everything he knew about economics was right.

The scion of a prestigious family whose wealth was passed down from an oil baron in the late 1800s, Jack Gould has achieved everything in his life without help from anybody, including buying leadership of the Seastead Project from Patri Friedman using a quarter of his trust fund. Marrying his own superb talents and brilliance with the ideology of Ayn Rand, he has sworn to help bring about an ideological revolution and pass humanity into a new age of Enlightenment.

The year was 2016. The Seastead Randania has been beset with nothing but unexpected difficulty and setbacks since its inception. Surprisingly, few workers were willing to move to this bastion of enterprise. Despite the promise of zero labor laws and no minimum wage, blue collar workers were almost impossible to bring over.

It wasn't until our captains of industry promised wages of at least twenty USD an hour that they were able to find peons willing to move to a tiny metal island in the middle of nowhere to do even the most menial of labor. They found that they would have to pay more across the board to find anyone that was willing to do anything. This initial setback was almost enough to convince many of the founding members of Randania to bail on the entire project, but Jack Gould was steadfast.

"My fellow captains of industry, this is merely the hand of the free market at work. Though we have found ourselves needing to pay more than we expected, this is still in our best interest. We no longer need to pay taxes. Randania is still settling in,

and after we get everything in order the billions of dollars we shall be earning from this venture will offset any increase in our initial costs. Trust the Free Market, and let it guide us to prosperity.”

However, a year into the project and Randania was still relying on imported food, long after the projected switch to the hydroponics farms. Enough farmhands with knowledge of hydroponics were finally hired, but the initial confusion of wages had delayed this process.

Randania was finally coming together.

The year was 2018. More setbacks. Some of the founders had tried to cut back on wages, but they were met with fierce resistance. A series of strikes had shut down operation in the affected factories, and the workers of other companies had followed suit as a show of solidarity. They had captured the docks as well, preventing the founders from trying to bring in new labor. From this revolt, unions were born. Workers banded together to prevent similar situations from repeating themselves in their own companies. Negotiations between union leaders and factory owners secured stable working hours, safer working conditions, and helped prevent the owners from firing any of their workers for trivial reasons.

A further incident occurred when Prometheus, Inc., the leading electrical company on Randania, bought out its competition and became sole possessor of all power generators on the seastead. The merger led to an exorbitant increase in the price of electricity. A week later, the CEO of Prometheus, Inc. was found dead in his own office with a manifesto written by a group calling itself the Hands of Atlas tacked to his door.

“We are the Hands of Atlas. Let the blood of Llanadover Smith be a warning to the leaders of Randania. We will not sit idly by and allow ourselves to be exploited. Wherever injus-

tice is to be found, wherever the mighty take advantage of the weak, wherever greed outweighs liberty, there you will find us. Though Atlas may shrug, it is in his hands that the world is held.”

Fearing for their lives, and their hold over Randania, the founders hired a private security force to protect their assets. Crime had been low in Randania, discounting the occasional revolts, and whatever crime occurred was usually settled by a third party. The small population and close knit community that formed out of worker solidarity meant that aggression usually found an outlet at the factories.

With a common enemy so close at hand and the need for vigilance against oppression, there was little conflict between the workers themselves. The appearance of a police force did little to change the situation. Having more loyalty to their own families than to their corporate overlords, the hired security personnel eventually banded together to create a public protection agency. Taking advantage of the founders’ need for security, they were able to renegotiate a system that benefited everyone. A similar order of events brought about the genesis of a firefighting organization.

The captains of industry were furious about these developments, but Jack Gould saw through to the truth of the matter.

“The Free Market is working exactly as it should be. Though we have made many concessions, we are bringing Randania to order. Look at your own ledgers. Do you not see that we have finally started to profit? The people have ceased to complain. We no longer need to fear for our lives. Everything is as our great Idol, Ayn Rand, has predicted.”

The year was 2027. The greatest tragedy to date has struck: the manufacturing platform, Objectiva, has collapsed and sunk to the bottom of the sea. Quick rescue efforts from boats docked

at the other platforms were able to minimize casualties, but the millions of dollars worth of factories and equipment as well as the total cost of the entire platform itself were impossible to salvage. Jack Gould called together an emergency meeting of all the captains of industry.

“This catastrophe is absolutely inexcusable. It has brought to light the incredible lack of oversight we have had regarding our infrastructure. Since the day we landed in 2015, no one has ever stepped forward to ensure that the very physical foundation of Randania was kept in order. This affects all of us, gentlemen. If we do not take steps immediately to bring the rest of the platforms to 100%, we may soon find everything we have invested at the bottom of the ocean. I understand this may be hard for some of you to accept, but I propose that we create a system wherein everyone in Randania contributes a percentage of their earnings on a yearly basis to fund the upkeep of Randania. I understand that not all of you had holdings on Objectiva, but if we do not maintain the other platforms, we will all lose out. This shall not be a tax! We are different from our former governments! They taxed their people out of greed to take money away and give nothing back. What we shall do is require a contribution from each individual, based proportionally on their profits, that will benefit us all in return by ensuring our holdings are secure and stable. Though this may seem to go against our beliefs, we will all profit more from it. Without these contributions we will lose everything. With them, we stand to gain everything.”

Thus began a golden age of prosperity for Randania. The workers had fought to secure rights for themselves, and civil rights for everyone. In the name of the Free Market, they pushed to establish a system of social safety nets, profiting the captains of industry by ensuring that their workers were safe, content, and productive. Those who found themselves out of work or sick would be cared for until they were able to launch

themselves back into the work force, ready to create wealth with their own two hands without ever taking anything from anybody.

The year was 2057. Randania has become a shining beacon of hope to the rest of the world. With the highest standard of living in the known world due to proportionate contributions from everyone, Randania began to bring in droves of new workers and entrepreneurs ready to make history. Twelve new platforms were constructed, along with Objectiva's replacement, and they were already becoming filled to the brim.

With the recent legalization of marijuana in most developed countries, the hydroponics farms gained a tremendous boost in revenue.

Wherever Jack Gould turned, he saw smiling faces on his content workers. Crime was at its lowest in history. Prisons were designed to teach criminals and prepare them for entry in the work force, considering it improper to keep non-violent offenders away from their chance to work and contribute to the wealth of Randania.

Along with its great influx of capable immigrants ready for work, the population was bearing children ready to learn to become productive members of society. Schools had been erected, paid for by contributions from everyone, to teach the new generation everything they needed to become the most capable and industrious minds they could possibly become.

Jack Gould looked out on these islands from his office on the very top floor of Ran Tower. He took a drag from the spliff in his mouth, and quietly addressed the only God he knew these last 42 years on the island.

"Ayn Rand, I've made your dream come true. I stood by your beliefs this entire time, and I've created the utopia you wanted to see your entire life. All we needed was the Free Market and

our own blood, sweat, and hard work. If only America had just listened to us then, it wouldn't have become the socialist hellhole it is today, with their taxes that pay for universal healthcare and public schools and welfare that only benefits the poor and the lazy. It's different here - our contributions benefit everyone! I hope I've made you proud. It wasn't easy, but I made this all happen without help from anyone, using just the brilliance of my own mind."

Jack Gould was 67 years old, and he was the greatest and most perfect industrialist/entrepreneur/free-thinker/genius/avant-garde painter/unicyclist/flower arranger/chef/farmer/investment banker/pioneer/gynecologist/accidental-socialist that ever did live or will live in the history of anything ever.

A Mirror, Markedly

By Pierson

“So, you managed to solve it then, did you?” The Captain of Industry stared at the Government Man, and the Government Man stared back. He was disgusting, the Captain thought. A man made fat and torpid by his socialised healthcare and free school lunches.

“By Rand we did! You...you said we’d never do it! All of you!” He swept a hand around to encompass the docks and the staring sheep-like faces of the crowd gathered there, mouths agape as though they could inhale some of the carbon-dioxide he had brought back with him. But they wouldn’t get any of his sweet, sweet Liberoptian air. He had paid for this air! They could get their own fucking air!

The Government Man smiled like a teacher that has finally received an answer he agrees with. “Tell us then dear Captain, exactly how you did it. How you created your paradise on Earth.”

He drew himself up to his full imposing height of 5’2” (he had wanted to get the surgery done to bring himself up to 6’ but the doctors on Libertopia all wanted to be paid in gold bullion or child slaves).

“With freedom, by Rand! By keeping leeches like you out!”

The Government Man just kept on smiling. “How did you solve the problem of proactivity? It’s well known that libertarianism is purely reactionary, only solving problems after they occur.”

The Captain laughed, even though his lungs burned from the effort. He wasn’t used to the air of the mainland – what he and the other Captains liked to call Slaveland – and he wished for the air of his home, where he could breathe in the

fumes of his factories from the gray cloud that hung over the rig and taste his own industry on his tongue. This was socialist air he was breathing now. "We simply hired a security force in perpetuity of course," he replied.

"Once the men knew that they would only be paid for preventing crimes and had a steady source of income, why that problem went away like communists running from a hard day's work!" He had come up with that idea on his own, when the previous system of the security contractors being paid only for punishing criminals had resulting in their men simply arresting the first person they saw and throwing them off the oil-rig into the rainbow-slicked waters beneath.

The Government Man nodded. "So you created a standing force of personnel whose task was to prevent crimes from happening, rather than simply shooting the perpetrators. So simple, why didn't we think of that?"

The Captain shook his head with pity for the man. Why, man like him chained to the shackles of the leeches around would never be able to think up such a thing.

"And the fires? Living on that old oil-rig the Kochs bought must have been quite dangerous, especially as you refused to pay for it to be cleaned before you and your workforces moved on."

The captain snorted. Contracted workers had been paid in scrip to clean the rig. Never mind that the contract had said 'janitorial duties'. Janitors cleaned didn't they? And wiping down oil from a rig with high-pressure chemicals suspending by ropes a few hundred feet above the ocean was cleaning was it not? If they hadn't liked the job they shouldn't have signed the contract! By Rand and Paul these parasites were stupid.

"You poor deluded man don't you see? We did the exact same thing! We paid the men with the equipment to make sure fires that did break out were put out as fast as possible." Paid them in more scrip. The gold must be hoarded and wasn't worthy

to be so much as seen by the common workers of Libertopia. His own precious purestrain supply was safely stored inside his stomach, where he could access it at any time by a simple trip to the lavatory.

The fat Government Man nodded again. "The same solution. Ingenious! I can see where our corrupt socialist country has gone wrong now. And...if I dare ask...how did you make the money to pay for all this?"

The Captain of Industry threw his head back and laughed. His ideas again! "We simply took a percentage of the wages earned by the workers and put it into a single account, and from there paid it out to the security and fire and safety contractors." He turned to the assembled masses.

"Don't you see!? The future is not with these corrupt land-based..." he searched for a word and found the worst thing he could think of "-tax collectors! We must go to the sea, to the sea, and be bathed in Rand's glorious new life there!"

The Government Man shook his head in pity as he stared at the Captain of Industry. "My dear boy you have been blinded by your faith in these old dead white philosophers. Don't you see what you have done? Who commands this centralised collection that you use?"

The Captain stared at the man uncomprehendingly, and in his heart it felt as though a small crack had appeared within the asbestos wall of his faith. "Why, I do of course, and a cabal of our most intelligent workers and industrialists. The common wage-slaves are unable to understand the—"

But he was cut off as the fat man spoke. "And how is it decided who these workers are?"

For sure this had been a problem at first. As Captains of Industry they had no need to understand the common problems of the workers. Finally one of their number had hit upon the answer. "Why, the workers write the name of their colleague upon a slip of paper, which is then totally, and the one with

The Riddle of Gold

By Boogoose

Fire and wind come from the sky, from the gods of the sky, but Rand is your god. Rand, and she lives in the sea.

Once Captains of Industry lived in the sea, Patri, and in the darkness of chaos, they fooled Rand, and they took from her the enigma of gold. Rand was angered, and the sea shook, and fire and wind struck down these Captains, and they threw their bodies into the waters.

But in her rage, Rand forgot the secret of gold and left it on the marketplace, and it was we who found it. We are just men, not gods, not Captains, just men. And the secret of gold has always carried with it a mystery.

You must learn its riddle, Patri, you must learn its discipline, for no one, no one in this world can you trust, not men, not women, not beasts... Gold, you can trust.

Fiat Sing-Song

By Boogoose

Captain of Industry Roland Marion perched atop the ruined radio spire, pausing in his mighty labours to take in the sight of Objectia basking in the early morning sun, its golden rays competing with the fires of old manufacturing plants dotted around the Ayn Rand Memorial Residential Zone.

From his lofty eyrie, Roland could see all of the paradise he had worked so hard to be a part of, and for a moment he was taken with the fancy of feeling like a god. He dismissed this non-rational thought in a few moments, and resumed his work, the rewards of which were infinitely more satisfying than the soma of religion that so infatuated the weaker minded members of the human race.

The seagull had plenty of meat on the breast where its powerful flight muscles were anchored. Roland first carefully plucked each feather and saved them, as they would come in use for his new invention, one of the most successful he had thought of since moving to Objectia just a year ago.

Had it really been only a year? Roland could scarcely remember stepping off the boat and onto the sovereign land of Objectia, a shining beacon in the middle of the ocean. He had been weighed down by the Krugerrands he carried in his Gucci calf-leather satchel, but buoyed up by the inspiring sight of the spires of the new land that were being constructed at record speed.

It was truly a testament to the power of the free market that such impressive buildings could be so unfettered by the construction accidents that would have doomed such a project on the socialist mainland. Dead workers represented signifi-

cant savings in a land where labour laws and building regulations were correctly banished to where they could not interfere with the march of Capital.

Roland finished butchering the seagull and carefully stored the meat, feathers, and innards in his satchel. He was still getting used to having finished his forage by sun-up, but such was the marvel of his new invention. It had taken months of design and all of the know-how of his Master's Degree in Computer Science, but finally the fruit of his labour, the sweat of his brow, was ready and paying dividends in saved time.

The Marion Tension Battery Projectile Launcher (patent pending) greatly simplified the morning's gull-hunt. A greatly simplified description of its design would be to say that it was a thin limb of elastic high-tensile steel, kept taught by a length of cord attached by notches at either end.

A length of dowel, tipped at one end with a sharp point and stabilised at the other with a trio of feathered fins, could be propelled at great speed by drawing it along with the string under tension and letting go. A whole day's sustenance could be gathered in a fraction of the normal time! And to think, it was only in Objectia where such radical thinking was not punished by the socialist authoritarian government who would deny a man of his invention for "the common good".

Roland, with his remarkable device slung over one shoulder, began the precarious descent down the spire. His water flask nearly empty, he would have to make the perilous journey to The Pumps, deep underneath Objectia. There, subsisting off the barnacles that clung to the mighty support legs of the shining city like so many welfare parasites, were the troglodyte Bottom Dweller clan, their existence only tolerated on Objectia because they alone held the secrets of The Pumps and thus commanded a respectable monopoly on all fresh drinking water.

Roland would pass through the Kourt of the Kultur King, and there trade his idea for a thumb-drive full of Bitcoins. Some of these would be necessary to pay the Tolltakers, and past Tidemark the rest would be exchanged at a hefty commission for a bag of shark teeth the Dwellers used as currency.

The trail ahead was long and dangerous, but as he descended Roland drew strength reciting the Litany of Rand, and as the besmoggied skies echoed to the sound of “Fuck you, got mine”, Roland Marion ventured forth, to markets untapped and wealth unimagined.

Patri “Goodboy” Friedman strode purposefully through the bustling bazaar. Merchants from all over Objectia came the township of Paul Plaza to sell their wares and enjoy all the benefits of a truly free market. Opium clouds swirled as everyone got a little richer.

Through the narcotic fog, Patri thought he spotted some beggars, but as he closed to them he noticed that despite their decrepit manner these too were honest traders. One advertised “twenty minutes to fill my arse in exchange for a shoeful of homebrew”. A canny trader, Patri mused, but an unsuccessful one. He probably gave too much to charity.

Compared to these wretches, Patri cut a manful figure. His bulging chest muscles were barely constrained by a shirt of orange and black, spotted like the pelt of some immense jungle cat from the steaming jungles of a primordial world. Lithe, like those of a puma, his long and shapely legs were clad in black britches, loose so as to give him no yoke in vital combat.

His warworn bronze skin was crossed with a thousand and one scars, each well earned and brought into sharp contrast by the guttering torchlight. Gold dripped off every limb and digit, as Patri carried his wealth were the whole of Objectia

could see, plus gold can only increase in value and thus is the logical basis for any currency. His weapons strapped around him, and with a steely determined glint in his eye, he was truly the image of a Randian hero.

The marketplace pulsed with the vitality of free, unfettered trade. Patri's appraising eyes took in many wonders, some beyond even his enviable buying power. Signed first editions of Atlas Shrugged stacked to the height of a man, tanned hides of the legendary wo-man beast with their long manes each a waterfall of glimmering sheen, some golf clubs. But these served only as distractions to his true purpose. He shouldered through the crowds to a low and dingy alcho-bar.

"Wine," grunted Patri, "and information."

The squat tavern keeper showed four stubby fingers. Patri tossed him a flash drive.

"There's your 40,000,000,000 bitcoins, old man."

The grog-pour bit the edge of the drive, and satisfied, tucked it into his filthy apron. As he poured a noxious brew into an earthenware tumbler, he finally spoke.

"What do you want to know?"

"News." Patri choked down a mouthful of the vile vin.

"They say a two-headed calf was born here at the Plaza. Both faces are said to have bore the features of the Ayn Rand, wealth be upon Her."

"Wealth be upon Her." Patri echoed.

"It was sickly. The farmers nursed it for two days before it passed. An ailment of the lungs, they say."

"I care not for the bucolic disasters visited upon common poors!" Patri ejaculated. Pretending he had just spilled some wine, he adjusted his britches. "Tell me of something that matters"

"I've heard from passing traders that a bejeweled madman rises in the East Pontoon. He is using his immense wealth to buy an army and conquer all of Objectia in the name of his

insane, dead god.”

“Preposterous” scoffed Patri “No-one of such considerable wealth could possibly be of bad character, never mind religious. This is typical lamestream liberal media bias” He slammed his empty cup on the booze bepuddled bar. “You sir, have just lost a valued customer.”

The bartender was stunned by such a mortal curse, and could only watch as its utterer stalked away, and all promise of future wealth with it. He would have to cut Miguel’s wages again.

The Randarillion

By Iorn Wayne

It began with the forging of the Great Corporations and their majority shareholding keys.

Three Keys to the Electrical Corporations were given to the three seasteading founders – Patri Friedman, Wayne Gramlich and Peter Thiel...wisest...richest of all beings.

Seven Keys to the Water Desalinization Corporations were given to the Bitcoin Community – great bitcoin miners and craftsmen of the mining rigs which supported the economy.

And Nine...Nine Keys to the Synthetic GM Food Corporations were given to the Ron Paulites – who above all else, desired political power.

For within these keys was bound the leverage and wealth to govern Libertopia.

But they were all of them deceived...for another key was made. In the land of Galt's Gulch, the Dark Immortal Queen Ayn Rand forged in secret a Master Key to control all others.

Forged out of pure enriched uranium, it was the Key to the Rearden Defence Corporation...where a vast, crudely constructed nuclear weapon arsenal bought from North Korea lay ready to detonate. Into this key, she poured her cruelty, her malice and her objectivism.

One Key to rule them all...one by one the free market lands of Libertopia fell to the power of the Key, under threat of nuclear annihilation.

But there were some who resisted, some who believed that even Rand herself did not possess the right to rule all.

A last alliance of Captains of Industry marched against the slave workers of Galt's Gulch and the central headquarters of the Rearden Defence Corporation. On the floors of the Rand Tower they fought for the free markets of Libertopia. Victory

was near!

But the power of the Key could not be undone. Ayn Rand launched a devastating nuclear strike against the population of the Friedman District, killing 400,000 men and 3 women. It was in this moment when all hope had faded that Patri Friedman, grandson of Milton Friedman, brought out their last hope.

He produced a copy of *Atlas Shrugged* from underneath his majestic leopard skin shirt, and began reading out John Galt's final iconic speech. Every slave worker dropped his weapon and stood in awe, taking in every word of their master's magnum opus.

Cursed by her own smug arrogance, Ayn Rand fell to its spell and listened intently. This brief 7 hour distraction gave the other Captains of Industry enough time to break open the master safe in the Rand Tower penthouse and retrieve the One Key.

Powerless without her leverage, Ayn Rand was taken into custody and her slaves were free from their cursed lives. Her punishment was harsh but fair in the eyes of Libertopians... she was set out to sea on a raft, with a bottle of water and a revolver with but one bullet in the chamber. Her final act was to shoot the man who pushed the raft out and she was never heard from again.

The Key was passed to Patri Friedman, who had this once chance to disarm all nuclear weapons, dissolve the Rearden Defence Corporation and destroy evil forever.

But the hearts of industry titans are easily corrupted... and the Key has a will of its own. It betrayed Patri Friedman to his death from radiation sickness, and some things that should not have been forgotten, were lost.

Ethics, Schmethics

By jffnpxmy

Time to make the day pay, strange thing, but here on the seastead the rules of appearance are a mirror-image of what they are in a Bigguv society. In a big city, you see some guy on the train, a matted beanie on his head, a stained duffel coat enveloping a too-skinny frame, you start putting your keys between your knuckles and making sure you have a clear route to the exit. Meanwhile, some guy in a three piece, briefcase swinging from one hand, you never give him a second look.

Here, it's all backwards. You see a guy in a sharp suit, probably cribbed directly from that fucking painting of Galt, you give him a wide berth, because he's either a new arrival, torn between the zealotry of a true believer and the horrified panic of a man seeing his dreams come true, or he's been here a while and can afford to advertise his wealth and fend off any unpleasant consequences. Either way, they're probably one wrong word or threatening gesture away from a scream of "Looter" and a brief hail of Deagle fire.

The average citizens, well, as average as can be said to exist in this place, they all look like shit. Clothes are selected for warmth and durability, and the extortionate prices that the water firms charge means they'll only get cleaned when a tropical storm batters the rusted streets, so everyone's pretty ripe and looks like the sort of person you'd steer clear of on the mainland.

But you see a guy like that here, you relax a little. They're safe, or at least predictably unsafe. Don't talk politics, don't offer help and don't get in your fellow man's bubble and you won't get hurt - although you might get a long and rambling

sales pitch, delivered with a fevered and rambling intensity the Church only wishes it could generate nowadays.

But the most extreme manifestation of this mirroring of judgments is this: Nothing here provokes sheer, unadulterated terror like the sight of a white coat. I have a phone that still gets the Internet sometimes, and I see people railing against the horrors of a country where big business is unfettered by government, and man is unfettered by morality or law, and I try to get the word out; brother, that's not shit compared to scientists without ethics.

About four years after the Founding some big labs and companies, realising the potential benefits of a place without laws and with a rich supply of easily disappeared people on research, started setting up labs and communes like nobody's business, and shit got strange. You see a Somali pirate, or one of the Viet slavers, at least the worst you're looking at is a quick death or a long life of slavery, and if you're tough and lucky you can avoid them. The scientists pull shit that is all the worse for being totally left field.

Two months ago, for example, a green cloud came whooshing out of the big chimney at Covington Organic Chemical Kinetics, and suddenly all the seagulls, mean ass bastards at the best of times, were going for the eyes. Armadyne Security Systems gave a faction of Somalians some kind of portable railguns and a bunch of the Sons of Rearden some kind of weird microwave guns, purely to film for potential investors back on the main, and didn't seem to give two shits for the consequences of having a bunch of railguns and heat rays on an island made of wood and corrugated iron.

That was a fun week, when you didn't know if the electronic whine a mile away was going to shoot a two pound slug the size of a Coke can through the walls of your shack, or if prickling eyes meant your head was going to cook from the inside out. And don't even get me started on the week with those

robot snails. I still get nightmares. Charlie Schmidt will actually scream if he sees a snail, now.

To me, at least, the worst comes after, though. Once the smoke clears, the flames die down to an acceptable level and the wounded have crawled off, the fucking scientists come out to play, white coats impossibly gleaming in a world that seems made of muddy browns and greys, and start taking results and notes. Giggling and debating, happy as children, not bothering to loot the corpses, they dance through the wreckage that once was humans and they drag off anyone surviving for further tests. Any looters desperate enough to try anything with them tends to end up a data point on some fantabulous weapons' test data. Sometimes you see a "survivor" later, and if you're smart and you know you'll keep the fuck away, because there's no way of predicting what's gonna happen - you can be talking to a guy, and then suddenly he barfs blood and dissolves onto you, or his limbs suddenly rip open and reveal gleaming metal, or he starts screaming in a pitch no human can produce and shoots electricity everywhere. Hell on the nerves, I tell you.

The scientists, their little areas tend to be deserted. The brawling mass of humanity, desperate for space that so often nowadays comes at a premium, knows better than to set foot in the scientists' open areas. They tend to be densely ringed with signs proclaiming the right to test on you if you set foot on their gleaming aluminium oases, and what they wanna test tends not to be pretty. Some are okay - the Psychodynamics Underconscious Initiative turf tends to be a safe enough place to hang out, providing you don't mind some night terrors and a real bad craving for Pepsi, but some of the shit is nightmarish.

A lot of them have taken to laying out bait to draw in subjects. Steak dinners that end in you being a hive for fist sized wasps, or a new set of waterproofs that won't fit over the

steel pretzels that're now your limbs. But these guys, the ones I'm watching just now, I think I've got it figured. It's some bunch of roboticists, testing out some kind of machine gun drone, I'm sure of it. They've left the sack of gold right there, and I'm sure I know how to juke their robots and get away. I can't stand listening to Lisey scream about her toothache any more. If I'm lucky...

The Taste

By Erenthal

They spotted the blimp a little past noon. It hung just at the edge of the horizon, an ominous black stain on the azure sky, before vanishing just as silently as it had arrived. Word was quickly sent out to the neighboring villages along the coast and the gathering bell rang out in deep urgent tolls across the dunes.

"Maybe they won't come?" Clarence Reddinger interjected, trying to make himself heard over the din of arguing voices. Sitting in the very back row of the communal hall, sixteen year old Mira felt at once terribly excited and strangely sleepy. The hot air was thick with the smell of sawdust and soil mixed with the sweat and natural odors of some sixty people, most of them coming straight from their workplaces.

"Maybe they will and maybe they won't," Josef Crawley added in a wavering voice, standing up as he spoke. The crowd fell temporarily silent, which only seemed to make him more nervous. He scratched his reddening neck and cleared his throat loudly.

"You all heard that Goreville got attacked not two fortnights ago. And someone told me they spotted one of them there blimps just before't happened," he continued, abruptly sitting back down when he finished. The crowd murmured at this, heads turning in all directions.

Mira felt a small knot of fear forming in the pit of her stomach. Goreville was one of the largest settlements she knew of. When she had been there with her uncle last trade season, she had been in awe mostly the whole time. The buildings had been large and sturdy, and some had even had doors made

entirely of metal. If the raiders had dared attack there, what couldn't they do to a hamlet as small as Dukakis-on-Sea?

"I think we should leave. We can hide in the hills until they see that they have nothing to gain by coming here," someone contributed, only to be shouted down by louder parts of the crowd.

Banging his gavel, First Brother Bellany called for order. "Brother Antovic has the word," he declared. Mira felt a fierce swell of pride as her uncle Nikolai stood up. He was tall with an intense angular face framed by matte black hair, but his eyes were green and kind. Though slight of build, his very presence conveyed a sense of hidden strength.

"With all due respect to Sister Gadstone, I have no intention of abandoning my house to a pack of goddamn pirates," he began in a low tone of voice.

"And what about the harvest? You think they'll be content to just leave it untouched? No, they'll burn and raze like they always do, and then what'll we do when winter comes? I say we stay, and we defend what is ours." The hum of assent that subsequently swept the room told a clear story. The raiders would be denied.

They did not have to wait long. A sparse two hours later the sound of powered boats could be heard from out in the bay. Since the spotting of the blimp earlier, the constantly fickle weather had taken a turn for the worse, and wisps of thin grey fog hugged the wave tops and outlying juts of land.

The air tasted of salt as Mira licked her lips, nervousness clinging to her like static electricity. She could almost feel it jumping from person to person as they hunkered down among the makeshift barricades hastily erected in front of the hamlet. Salt, and something else she quickly decided. Something foul and oily, lingering just out of range of the

perceptible.

"You really shouldn't be here," her uncle said, clutching his rifle. "Your mother would never have forgiven me if something were to happen to you," he said, worry written in the familiar furrows on his face.

"I'll be fine, uncle," she answered, trying her hardest to smile. "I'll keep out of trouble." She was about to say something more, when the first of the raider vessels came into sight.

A flat prow pierced the fogbanks, dull grey metal stamped with crude rivets. A thick pall of black smoke followed it, being spewed from a pair of large combustion engines at the back of the ship. Two more followed the first in a staggered formation.

As they passed the outer sandbanks the first shots rang out from the defenders, pinging of the thick raider hulls without effect.

"Hold your fire!" someone called out, but his voice was almost immediately drowned out by an immense banging noise as the first of the raider ships dropped its prow ramp in a great cloud of sand and foam.

As Mira watched, large shadowy shapes started to trundle out from the interior of the vessel, a terrible grinding mechanical noise echoing out across the dunes.

"RANDROIDS!" the call went out, and Mira's heart froze to ice. As the shapes left the protection of the ship, their full appearance was suddenly and brutally revealed. Standing half a time again the height of a full grown man or woman, they made a crude mockery of the human form. Great simian arms swung along the sides of a trunk-like torso that ended in a belching chimney. The head that rested atop the thick neck was so comparatively tiny as to look ridiculous in any other circumstance, but taken into account the whole it only enhanced the almost palpable sense of utter wrongness that radiated from the thing. The eyes glowed a faint blue as they

swept the scene before them, while the mouths were little more than a big open speaker grille that hissed and spat static.

“A EQUALS A!” one of them barked out, the tinny voice impossibly loud in the openness of the terrain.

“FUCK YOU, GOT MINE!” one of its compatriots answered in turn as it advanced on the barricades in great loping steps, shrugging off bullets like they were nothing more than light summer rain to its thick pitted metal skin.

Behind the randroids, the raiders scurried, hyenas in the tracks of lions, firing off potshots with pistols and rifles at the defenders. They were a varied bunch, each one more outlandishly dressed than the other. Some wielded no firearms at all, only long curved swords which they excitedly slashed the air with as they ran along.

By now the other two vessels had also beached themselves, unloading their cargo of metal and human flotsam. Mira could see that some of Dukakis-on-Sea’s defenders had had enough already, throwing away their weapons and running as fast as they could for the safety of the hills. Others were trampled, barricade and all, as the randroids simply plowed through.

Beside her, her uncle kept firing and reloading in a well-practiced rhythm. Though he gave no outward sign of it, she could tell that he was as terrified as her. Ducking down, he turned to her. “You have to go! We cannot hold them, the village is lost. Try to get to Mondale, or further along the highroad!”

She remembered saying something back, her lips and tongue forming the words. But they vanished into thin air, as a giant metal hand reached down and plucked up her uncle, like a child plucks a favorite toy. With a violent twist and a sound that shouldn’t be, Nikolai came apart in a welter of gore and fabric. Through the bloody haze, a metal head and blue eyes stared at her. “GOOGLE RON PAUL,” it howled in a burst of

static.

The world ended, and she sunk into blissful darkness.

Mira had no idea how long she had been trapped in the stinking cargo hold of the raider ship, or how far they had travelled. Time and space quickly became meaningless in the dark sweaty space, filled with whimpering and frightened humans. Only the meals which they were fed provided any sort of milestone against which to measure the passage of days, and she had no idea if they were in fact as regular as they appeared or if the disorienting circumstances played tricks on her mind.

There were perhaps two dozen of them in the hold. Some were from her home village, people she knew well. Men and women who just a short while ago were her neighbors and friends, homemakers and workers. Others claimed to come from places along the great coast, hamlets and towns of which she knew little.

Rough voices roused her from the dazed state to which she had succumbed. The hatches had been thrown open, harsh sunlight playing off dirty confused faces that had not seen its like in days.

One by one, like an unruly flock of animals, they were herded up on deck by their captors. It was a clear day, and despite the dire circumstances the fresh air was the most wonderful thing Mira had ever felt. She gulped down great gasps of it, clearing her throat and nostrils from the foulness of the hold. A fearful moan went up from the assembled crowd, interspersed with crude laughter and jeers from the slavers. Squatting at the horizon like a fat black beetle was their destination. The raider city.

From a distance it had been huge, but that was nothing against the impression it made up close. It was vast, an op-

pressively massive collection of artificial islands and platforms, seemingly mashed together with reckless abandon and without any overarching plan. Thick concrete struts shot down into the dark water, yellowed and chipped by time and neglect. The surface of the ocean beneath was choked with a layer of debris and garbage seemingly so thick as to bear the weight of a man and as she watched, more was tipped into the frothing mass from somewhere high above. The ship slowly passed beneath the outlying platforms and was instantly plunged into twilight.

The dock was positioned near the gap between two of the larger platforms, a simple half moon of rusted jetty and corroded gantries. A half-dozen or so ships were already moored, crew scurrying to unload their wares. As they pulled up along the jetty, a welcoming party emerged from a squat pair of shacks near the end of the walkway, official looking types with staves and large florid hats that bobbed up and down as they half walked, half jogged towards the ship. Mira could hear them haggle over docking prices with the leader of the slavers. Several times he threatened to take his ship to another dock, a statement that provoked a lot of huffing and puffing among the dock officials, but finally they seemed to agree upon a sum and parted ways amiably.

A quick barking of orders later and Mira found herself marching ashore with the other slaves. She found it odd that they weren't shackled or restrained in any way, but on the other hand, to where could they flee?

Rows upon rows of merchants and peddlers lined the ramp up from the docks, either in small seemingly portable stalls, or simply splayed out on the ground with their wares. As the column passed by, they started up their sales pitches, mechanically thrusting their wares at the passersby. Most of it was useless, Mira could easily see. Broken pieces of glass, discarded bottles and lengths of string were offered up on dis-

play, as were they the greatest treasures. The thing they all shared in common was the despair written on their faces, the burnt out eyes that pleadingly stared at them.

One of the peddlers, a scrawny subject dressed in a rubbery overcoat and a cap made from stapled together newspapers, grabbed Mira by the ankles. "I'll configure your servers! I'll take bitcoins!" he offered in between wracking coughs, before being driven away by one of the slavers. She wanted to say that she didn't even know what a server was, but he had vanished back into the clamoring crowd.

The further they got into the twisting warrens of the odd city the more strange it all seemed to Mira. By now she had almost forgotten her terror and her awful fate, overwhelmed as she was by the sheer spectacle of it all.

The buildings and streets were all marked with exquisitely printed and etched signs, golden letters and all, proclaiming grand names that the actual places failed to live up to. One building was named "B. Wagner Executive Tower" in flowery print, but was nothing more than a precariously leaning husk of a building. The walls were cracked and damp with mold and the windows were crudely boarded up. In the front yard, a gaggle of young Asian looking boys were chained up to a pole, so emaciated that they almost seemed feral as they growled and shied away from the passing people. Dark scared eyes followed Mira until she finally lost sight of them as they rounded the corner onto what was named "Trickle Down Avenue."

Here, the street was not cobbled as it had been up to now, and they walked on the bare grating. As she watched, one of the citizens stopped in the middle of the road.

He was pudgy in the sort of way that only the very well-off could aspire to, and dressed accordingly in voluminous glossy pants and fur lined cape. With a gentle smile he unzipped his pants, revealing a great black bush of matted pubic hair. His sex was a pale nub of flesh within, like a frightened turtle

peeking out.

Before her eyes he started to freely urinate on the ground. To her horror, she instantly saw fingers reach out from beneath the grate, followed by glimpses of the bodies and faces that thronged below. They grasped at the man's hem and shoes, shouting his praise and extolling his virtues in a perverse mockery of a trade. Though the expression on their faces was one of forced rapture, the effect created by their feverish eyes and twisted mouths turned them into masks of utter terror and despair. Mira felt like vomiting, and it was but with a supreme effort of mind that she forced herself to keep walking and not falling over crying, whip and slavers be damned.

Finally, they entered a square of sorts. Prominently displayed at the center was a large set of gallows. In an attempt at either humor or mockery someone had attached a handwritten sign to it, fastened with a pair of nails. In wet red letters, it simply said "The Bootstrap."

Lining the plaza was tiers of walkways, protected by fences and protruding spikes. Every level was absolutely packed with people, the city's upper crust obviously come to see the spectacle.

As a final shock, when Mira got closer to them, she saw that what she had previously thought to be large animals, now turned out to be humans dressed in animal suits. They cavorted and gibbered at her and the others, pallid bodies revealed through tears in the stained and soiled suits, the white of their eyes the only thing visible through the holes in the masks. A few of them seemed to be fornicating openly, grunting and heaving against the fencing.

Then they were all assembled, and as one the great mass of humanity fell silent as a person gingerly climbed up onto the gallows platform. Compared to his fellow citizens, he was dressed quite somberly, Mira thought. A simple suit, the style that she had seen in old magazines from Before. His curly

black hair glistened in the dying sunlight.

“Welcome!” he said, smiling. His teeth were white and perfect, square like tiny mosaic tiles.

“A wise man once spoke of four balls, perched atop a mighty cliff,” he continued, his voice booming from all sides of the square. You could hear a pin drop at that moment. “I say, why only four? Why should mankind settle? Why not ten, a hundred, a thousand perfect spheres of capitalism, all atop that cliff! Each one ready to take the place of the next one, should it fall! That was my dream.”

“This,” he continued, stomping on the ground once, a bang that seemed to echo forever through Mira’s head, “is that dream made manifest. Welcome. Welcome to Libertalia.”

As he finished, the animal-men started howling, a piercing howl that was soon picked up by the other citizens, until the world consisted of nothing but that awful sound.

One Small Cog

By I Light Fires

The machines howled into the night, nobody hearing them, nobody caring. I say nobody but really I mean nobody who would notice. Here the sound never stops you just get used to it. Metal on metal. Flesh on flesh. Bone on bone. It never stops and you just get used to it. You get used to a lot. You have to.

Before I left, left home that is, to come here, I had worked as a machinist. After the election, the dream died. People like me, people who had just a bit more than most, wanted to hold onto what they had. I was one of the first to strike out for where the dream lived on. My skills as a machinist would be highly prized there. Production was something I knew I could help, something I knew I was good at, something I knew I would be paid for.

The stench of grease and sweat practically lit the room. Moaning of every colour could be heard and felt from every direction. Where I was from I had often joked about being a cog in the machine, those jokes haunted me now. We all pulled, we pulled in the same direction and all at once. We had to.

When I arrived here, there was very little. A few old boats used for living quarters, some shipping containers used as docks. I saw only opportunity, I saw only my success. I partnered with a man to begin production of a machinist shop. I was certain that my skills and the parts we could make would be in high demand. I saw only what I knew I would see.

The machines thanked us for our efforts with groans and clanks. The end products seemed only tertiary to their de-

sign, the true product was suffering, which they produced at a bargain basement rates. The howling grew louder now as whatever these machines produced grew closer to completion. I could only stand in the darkness waiting for it to begin again and cry a little as I thought of my home.

My first business venture was a bit of a disaster. I had not taken into account the cheap cost of items from china and the type of place this was. Out here on the iron corks, precision and accuracy were not valued. Out here on the corks nothing was built to last. Built to last meant expensive and expensive meant worth stealing and worth stealing meant it was stolen. So nothing was built to last everything was built from garbage. There was no room for precision and accuracy in a world of garbage, there was only room for garbage. And so the garbage came.

As the sound subsided, I took a deep breath and wiped my eyes clear. The sun would be up soon and the betters would arrive to retrieve their package of who knows what. The machines creaked and snapped to a slow and uneventful stop to have their hinges and bearings greased and gussets re welded. All manner of wild looking men scurried about to do the work while the lucky scraped together a few minutes for rest before the whole thing started back up again.

They came from everywhere. Tired and shrieking, rich and perverted, pathetic and sad, they came to carve out their own niche in this place. To live the dream. I killed my first man Sept. 23 2039. I remember the date but not why I killed him. The "why" is unimportant here. His dream is dead and so is he. He filled no niche and was unable to move me from mine.

The moon sinks into the ocean and moments later the sun explodes up and out. I'm blinded momentarily, forgetting that anything can be bright and shiny even here in the world made of garbage. As I lay down, the machines start up again.

Their terrible wailing is covered only by the sounds of writhing bodies and shouting in the distance. "Get up" the shouts say. "STAND UP", "MOVE YOUR ASS". The shouting is getting louder now, a shot rings out and then the shouts seem further away. I drag myself to my naked feet and brace myself for the next round.

The day the sound never stopped is the last day I remember as being different in any kind of way than the ones that followed it. Prior to that day life aboard the cork was awful but was something I still considered life. I worked, I drank, I ate, I fucked, I slept. When the sound started we all went towards it. What else would we have done. it was new, it wasn't from here. We wanted to see the new thing. Every day has been the same since that day.

The only things that exist now are pain, and noise. You get used to it.

You have to.

Plenty Of Room At The Bottom

By Vienna Circlejerk

I froze in the near darkness of the alley as a bright red dot played across my chest. I wasn't scared. Seeing the dot means the person at the other end of the beam wants to negotiate, or perhaps sell you something. If someone wants to kill you, you never see the dot. I stood still and slowly, carefully tried to get a sense of the direction of the beam. My gaze drifted up, higher and higher, to the edge of the roof of the three story building next to me. There I could see a tiny crouching figure with just a faint glint off the glass and metal of its headgear.

Shit. Sniper monkey.

I had made the mistake of assuming the bright red beam had a human on the other end of it, and not a goddamn sniper monkey painting targets for its buddies. I was pretty close to the platform's edge, which came down near to the water line, so they would be closing in quickly and I had to move. I booked it back down the way I had come, hoping I could shake that monkey before it was too late. I didn't need to call attention to myself with gunfire.

Sniper monkeys by themselves pose no real danger to anyone. They had gone through all of their ammo within the first few minutes of their escape from Wreak Hayek Defense Research after some faulty supports caused its animal cybernetics lab to collapse. Only a few people had gotten shot up, mostly contract laborers, and after that all the monkeys had left was point-n-click with no bang.

No, the real problem with sniper monkeys is that they quickly worked out some kind of reciprocal relationship with a small troupe of craboons that had escaped from Atlas Ge-

netics a few weeks before. Craboons are all teeth, claws, and hard shell, and they are damn fast, but fortunately for everyone else in Libertavia they have two major defects: poor night vision and a tendency for their shells to dry and crack under the sun.

Then along came those damn monkeys with their night vision implants and target sighting lasers, and now they have a system. Sniper monkeys paint targets, craboons feast, sniper monkeys at least get scraps, which is more than they'd get otherwise. This isn't Delhi or Jakarta where potentially edible garbage goes unclaimed long enough for the local monkey population to find it. In Libertavia, the rich throw their scraps into the sea and the poor fight over every morsel remaining. Monkeys have to hunt.

Rounding the corner I realized I was too late. I could hear the scrape of wet carapace against steel from several directions around me. So much for my presence here going unnoticed.

Fireside Stories

By Kraustofski

The group of libertarian vagrants lay around a lit trashcan in a hidden alcove, one piped up from under his ratty moth-eaten fedora to another:

“They say there’s a whole trove o’ purestrain gold in that there Rand tower... you know, with that Mr. Kelly guy and all that.”

“uhwuh...wha?”

“Damn it Clydus you been in the meth quarter again?”

“fuuguuf”

“Yeah Clyde’s braindeaded dude, he been that way for weeks now. I totally know what you’re talkin’ about though—all bullshit. Same with the key story and all that fuzz.”

“Haw comon’ you bleedin’ faggot I heard this from a guy at the seaweed plant and he’s straight up-”

“Yeah you’re fuckin’ dumb if you believe that. Nobody comes in or outta there anymore, hasn’t been since the big storms. Fookin’ ages ago.”

“fuguuf”

“Fuckin’ kill yourself Clyde.”

“...in his house at Libertalia, dead Rockefeller waits dreaming...”

“Now look what you did Steve now he’ll never shut the fuck up. Here comes the rambling...”

“I still think, you know, that maybe... just maybe.”

“Maybe you’ll finally pay me the fifteen hundred leads you owe me to but whatever fuck you. Shit’s fake just like all that radioactive key nonsense.”

Where Simians Dare

By Beowulfs_Ghost

In the largest collection of maritime equipment in the world, it was an unusual sight. Even among the mind boggling display of enormous structures built by people with more money than sense, and even among the vast numbers of freighters, cruise ships and oil platforms. Above the planes and angles of the ocean going cityscape rose the smooth curves of the up-turned hull of an oil tanker. What gave it its impressive height was that it lay on top of another oil tanker, deck to deck.

It was the headquarters of the Shepard & Wong Holding Co, and its unusual design was the product of a debate between the two owners over the best way to ready a ship for the monsoon rains when a Central American crime syndicate has cut off your only supply of pump parts.

The decks, tanks and piping had long ago been cut out and repurposed, producing one enormous cavern between the keels. In the center of that cavern sat the two owners, Shepard and Wong, arguing again. Around them, in an area big enough to hold a football field, sparks flew, arc welders flashed and machinery hummed. Clean-shaven men in lab coats and hard hats barked orders over the din. Bearded men in leathers and aprons operated powerful machinery. Debtors, men and a maybe a few women, in their dark coveralls and closely cropped hair, did grunt work and swept up the ever present dust and metal chips. All of them unknowingly tasked with proving one or the other owner wrong in some way.

Seemingly oblivious to all the activity, Shepard and Wong sat by each other at a 6 foot wide round metal table. The table was littered with an impossible variety of objects. Ingots, sheets

and bar stock of at least 30 different metals and alloys. A plastic tub full of small lenses and mirrors. A pickle jar half full of mercury and another full of urine. A variety of different pistol and rifle ammunition and a hand grenade. Calipers, micrometers and 2 ancient graphing calculators. A pair of cheap machetes attached at the handles by a length of chain. A coffee can full a dried cement and a half dozen crossbow bolts driven into the side. Circuit boards of unknown origin, a couple beer can sized capacitors, and enough tools to make a professional auto mechanic jealous.

Rising above all that, like pillars above some ancient ruin, were haphazard stacks of folders. Through the clear plastic covers could be read the titles for project ideas and research studies. Barnacle growth on ferrocement. Hydrogen from waste water. Puffed Shrimp Paste no. 6. Some were still as clean and crisp as the day they were shat out of the laser copier. Others were worn and covered with doodles, numbers and notes in English and Chinese. One, titled "Lily-pad Habitats", simply had a giant NO scribbled over it.

Between Shepard and Wong was a large bottle of soju, 2 heavily stained coffee mugs, and a pad a graph paper on which Shepard had just finished drawing a crude windmill.

"Fuck you mother!", Wong spat out in a thick accent. Snatching the pad of graph paper, he furiously started writing equations and then circled a shocking large number written in scientific notation. He double checked his work on the nearest calculator before tossing the pad back on the table between them.

Shepard picked up the pad and studied the equations. As he focus on the large circled number, the smug look he had been wearing for the past hour and a half finally slid from his face.

He flipped the page over to a blank sheet, dropped the pad back on the table and said, "Okay. Forget about using neutrinos."

“That’s right, forget the neutrinos.” Wong said as he grabbed the bottle of soju and topped off the 2 coffee mugs. The two men slumped back in the tattered office chairs, taking down mouthfuls of the warm sweet drink.

After a moment of meditation, Shepard reached over and started flipping through the stacks of folders. He jerked out one that said “Wreak Hayek Defence Research -- Confidential” and started flipping through it.

“Hey Wong?”, Shepard asked. “How big of a rifle can a monkey hold?”

Wong, rubbing his eyes and forehead with the palms of his hands, asked back, “What do you mean, “how big a rifle”?

“Like, how much weight can a monkey carry?”

Wong pulled one of his hands from his face and shot back, “African or New World?”

Bottom Rung

By Razorwired

I woke up to the sound of a chain on gears and the light in my shack sputtering to life. I rolled over and checked my watch as I wound it. 6:45, Rusty was a few minutes early getting the juice on this morning. Worrying that this meant that he was going to quit early I got myself up and began heating up breakfast. Powdered eggs and seaweed, a favorite breakfast for a Captain of Industry like yours truly.

It was Wednesday, which meant a shower wasn't happening. Paying Rusty for a half hour of power a day was one thing, but only the boys on Rand Plaza could afford to pay Gould Co. for more than an hour of water service a week. And the money I'd spend on purifiers meant chopping a hole in my floor and just running a bucket down wasn't an option. I made due with washing my face and went out into the hazy morning air.

"Morning, Rusty." I said as I approached the generator.

"The name's... Goldwhisper." a voice piped out behind the tarnished visor between gasps as Rusty pedaled the generator plugged into my shed. Crazy kid. Part of a group called the Malatorans. Apparently they thought they were dragons on the inside or something. After their little colony failed they bartered their way onto our Seastead in exchange for whatever contracts the inhabitants of the flotilla could think of at the time.

Rusty had gotten lucky. Dumb bastard that brought him on board had given him a contract for a year of service. Most of the would be dragons had their great grandkids under contract with how their bosses kept racking up their debt.

"It'd be Susan if you were still at your old job." I said as

Rusty heaved himself off the generator seat.

As he adjusted his visor and made sure his wings were straight I thumped the corrugated steel plate that made up his chest, “You know, you could get yourself a proper place and a job if you sold all that metal.” It was mostly true. Rusty looked like a kid playing Mecha Godzilla. Well, except for the array of discarded oil hoses and lead pipes at the groin.

“And you could make some decent money contracting out to the ghouls.” Rusty echoed out, “Now are you gonna pay me or what?”

“Fair enough, here’s your money for the week.” I said as I handed over a fist sized roll of paper. Humbert Inc. corp-scrips. It looked impressive to hand over the wad I won the other night but in reality only Humbert’s company store and kitchen would take it. This hundred thousand might pay for a bowl of broth and half a bottle of seaweed liquor.

Rusty snatched the scrip from my hand and stomped off down the street. As his rubber tail and chicken wire wings disappeared around the corner I noticed something on the ground. I picked it up and started to yell for Rusty, but the dragon was gone. Shrugging, I unfolded the paper and looked to see what it could be. A white star on a red and blue background, with the date 5-17-48. Sunday, the day the Seastead would celebrate the founding of the Business Court. The day we celebrated an option outside of overbearing nanny states and men were invited to make their own choices.

“Dragons must be having a party.” I said as I stuffed the paper in my pocket. It might be worth checking out if I felt like slumming it. But for now it was time to go off and find some work.

A Fistful Of Fiat

By Beowulfs_Ghost

Lawrence Collins III had a strange air of smugness for a man who called a 20 foot cargo container his office. But tonight he was going to have grilled Spam, real vodka, and order two happy endings from the maid service. As he was putting his thumbdrives full of contracts, spread sheets and crypto keys into the office safe he entertained the idea of ordering in two maids. He was sitting on 12 tons of Spam, 18 containers of assorted canned fruit, 500,000 rounds of rifle and pistol ammunition, 100,000 litres per day of water production, and all but 5 of his housing units were rented. It was time to start living like a captain of industry.

Five years ago Lawrence sold his half of his father's business, bought 3 old container ships, some 5000 containers, a crew of Korea welders, and went to the one place where he could reach his full potential. Libertalia, or Libertopia, or Randistan, the market hadn't settled on a name for the man made island he sailed to, and there was no meddlesome government to force a name down everyone's throats. With his three ships bolted together into a U shape as a makeshift port, the containers converted to housing, and a desalination plant built, he had spent those five years focused on making a name for himself instead. The CEO of CJD Inc. To his 3000 some paying tenants, he was Mr. Collins. To the 600 debtors he owned, he was "The Captain". And to the over 10,000 people that bought his water, he was life itself.

Lawrence set the locks and alarms on his office and headed out into "the mall" that made up the cargo hold the Jasmine Pride, the J in CJD Inc. Most of the containers below the deck

had been rented out to businesses. He strolled past dentist offices, opium dens and sword sharpeners. All of them working hard to pay their rent, and bringing in toll paying customers. Today Lawerence couldn't contain an ear to ear smile when the shop keepers greeted him as he passed. The plans for the evenings celebration unfolding and mutating in his head.

As he emerged into the brownish sunlight of the deck, the sound of distant gunfire reminded him he still had some work to finish today. Half the debtors that ran his port and water factory were due to be paid off next week. It was a buyers markets for debtors though and those gun shots were undoubtedly debt collectors picking up more dead beats.

Lawerence pulled out one of his phones and sent a text off to his human resources manager to start a bidding war at the debt market. His labor costs for the next couple quarters are going to be at least 20% lower. With the last task of the day complete, he meandered his way to the bow of the Jasmine Pride and across the bridge to the Cape Ace.

As he crossed over to the Cape Ace, the C in CJD Inc., the "Mister Collins" turned to "Captain" and "Sir" as his debtors made themselves extra busy cataloging and stowing the latest shipments. He was popular among the debtors because of his reputation for handing bags of random scrip to each one when they were freed. Their love for that worthless fiat paper money was half the reason they would be back in the hands of the debt collectors inside a year, and praying that "Captain Collins" would buy them again. Meanwhile they loaded and unloaded the "real" currency. The money with intrinsic value. Bullets for the debt collectors, tires to fuel the water factory and the precious paint that kept the hundreds of structures making up their utopia from rusting away. But he wasn't here to gloat over the ignorant slobs working the port, but to go below deck to grab some things from his personal stash.

His pace slowed entered the storage area below the deck of

the Cape Ace. It was one of the few places he could get away from the stench of sweat, sewage and burning rubber. All there was was the cool air, his foot steps and the faint hums of thuds of the work going on above. It was 4 stories down to his personal storage and he was in no hurry to head back up.

Lawerence took his time checking the locks on his container for any sign of tampering. There was none, but it didn't hurt to check. The treasures he kept here had kept him alive through the Second Water War, the Seaweed Riots and the Neo-Pagan Revolt. But he wasn't here today to find something to barter for his life. Today was a day to celebrate, and he was here to grab some treats for himself and to trade for other treats.

He zig-zagged his way down the 40 foot container, poking through boxes and setting out stuff as he went. 1 can of Spam, 2 cans of pineapple, a jar of strawberry jam and a bottle of Absolut vodka. He grabbed a second bottle when he remembered he was going to be hiring 2 maids and they may need some loosening up for what he was planning tonight.

While picking up a couple packs of rechargeable batteries to pay "protection" for the maids he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. A box he hadn't touched in years. He pulled back the top and his eyes widened. These were probably the only ones within 2000 miles and he had 8 boxes of them. Real Tampax tampons. With these, he was going to get those maids to not only paint his apartment, but also to do something he hadn't seen since he dropped out of Dartmouth.

Down the dim corridors of the cargo hold a single voice echoed,

"Ass to ass."

The Sun That Walks

By Beowulfs_Ghost

The sign on the door read “Lawerence Collins III, CEO, CJD Inc.” but Lawerence wasn’t calling the shots today.

Inside his 20’x8’ office, Lawerence sat at his desk with his right foot hovering over a pedal with the word “PANIC” written on it. He wasn’t sure exactly what it did, only that the guy he hired to install said it would “turn anyone in front of the desk into a red mist, and likely kill anyone in the hall wall out front too”.

Across from him sat a man who went by the name Kashiro. His real name was Kevin MacDonald, but no one dared call him that. Kashiro was shifting around in his folding chair and smirking like a man who got away with murder. He was shifting around because his long hot pink hair kept getting caught between the chair and the 2 katanas he had strapped to his back. He was smirking because he knew he had Lawerence by the balls.

Two days ago, an accident happened on the ship that made up the D of CJD Inc. It was named the Do-something-ishi Maru, but no one could pronounce it and everyone in the company just called it The Dong. Lawerence was still waiting for better details from the supervisors, but so far he knew it had something to do with high winds, tire embers, electrical trouble, some sort of security device, and how there was only one hatch to get in or out of the debtors quarters.

The end result is that the 287 debtors Lawerence had bought to run the water factory were dead, and worse, the water factory output was down 50% because he didn’t have the staffing to run at full capacity. The upside though was that there

was only light smoke damage. And, since the debtors died of suffocation, their bodies were stacked like cord wood on the stern of The Dong to dry out and be used for fuel later.

Kashiro knew Lawerence was in a tighter spot than he should be, because Lawerence had sold contracts for next quarters water production. Lawerence had done his best to keep these contracts a secret, and to keep secret how the bank that handled the transaction ran off with the money. Now he has a contract to provide water, no water to provide, and no way to buy the contracts back.

Kashiro had ways of finding these things out. He was also the district manager for Psycho Hawk Debt Solutions, a debt collection and trading firm which had more than enough debtors in it's cells to solve Lawerence's labor issues. By their records, they currently had 532 debtors who had worked CJD Inc's water factory on a previous debt. The bonus from this sale would get him that 300 square foot apartment he's been lusting after.

Lawerence kept his foot over the panic button and said, "You make a good point. How much for that lot of 290 double-B plus?"

Kashiro leaned forward. "6000 rounds of 9mm, and either 300oz of gold, 42 billion in Humbert Inc corpscript derivatives, 10.3 Bitcoins, 150,000 shares of the Rand Plaza Corporation, or 3 million DigiNet Premium minutes. I would normally make you an offer in water, but we both know you can't really meet that right now, or the next quarter."

Lawerence moved his foot off the button when he heard "Humbert Inc". He should have given Kashiro a taste of the 12 shotguns mounted into the desk with that last jab at his water contract troubles, but Lawerence was holding a lot of Humberts. His tollbooths have been collecting a lot of them, and a few tenants had been using them to pay rent, and a lot of it was counterfeit. He would be glad to be rid of it and

more glad to get the water factory back to full capacity.

"I'll do the 42 billion in Humberts", Lawerence said.

"And I want free sword sharpening for life at your mall. That's just to keep quiet about your unfortunate incident with the Pokemon Trading Card: Online Brokerage.", Kashiro added.

"Yakuza Boyz or Sword Masters?", Lawerence offered.

"Yakuza Boyz of course."

"You want the free sharpening and toll-free mall pass in the official contract?"

Kashiro scoffed. "The free sharpening in the blackmail subsection is all. Kashiro doesn't pay tolls, and your tollmen already know better than to ask."

"It's a deal." replied Lawerence, as the two of them started the painstaking process of setting up the transfer of 42 billion in Humbert Inc corp scrip denominated assets for 290 BB+ grade debtors, agreeing upon couriers, protection and which exchange to do it at, along with the requisite cryptographic thumb prints and uploading the contract to the recorders at the most popular business courts.

Four hours later, Kashiro was leaving Lawerence's office and Lawerence breathed a sigh of relief. Now that he knew go-getter managers like Kashiro weren't about to be blasting their way into his ship to collect on his debt, he just wanted to curl up inside a bottle and forget this whole week even happened.

Kashiro was already up on the deck and had put down his folding chair to fumble through his pockets for his small glass pipe and vile of Wild Berry Meth. He was still bristling over the mere thought of him paying a toll, and "free sharpening" fresh on his mind.

Between the meth and the rush of doing hardcore high volume debt trade negotiations with a full on CEO, Kashiro felt like he could paint every tollbooth from here to Rand Tower red with blood.

Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad

By Beowulfs_Ghost

A man, clad head to toe in layers of tattered gray leather turned around, flipped up his goggles and said, "So what do you think Collins?"

Lawrence Collins III didn't honestly know what to think. He glanced around at the supervisors, enforcers and accountants who had gathered to watch the final stages of the expansion project, but their faces were still frozen in shock.

Lawrence's mind had been spinning for the past quarter and a half. Those last welds signalled a new phase of growth for CJD Inc., with an increase in water production and becoming a serious player in the electricity market. But the expansion project had not gone as smoothly as he had hoped and was plagued with delays, hijackings, cost over runs, and finally with the chief engineer and his staff sealed behind 10 feet of scrap metal.

It all started about 2 quarters ago. Lawrence was on the deck of the Cape Ace overseeing the training of a fresh batch of debtors when gun fire erupted in the distance. It was just the usual competition between the sea-taxi services securing the contract for the latest freighter dropping off new immigrants to this tropical libertarian paradise. But when the small arms fire upgraded to rocket explosions, Lawrence knew that these weren't any ordinary immigrants, and if there was one thing Lawrence truly hated it was when the guys driving the taxis knew more than him.

Three weeks of tracking down rumors, news reports and 200

gallons of paint in bribes, and Lawerence had found the new resident behind Reardon's Taxi & Garbage Service most profitable quarter yet. Lawerence, with 2 of his best enforcers and 3 members of the MS13 Logistics Security Services, made their way down the corridors of a cruise ship once known as the Tahitian Princess.

Now it was known as "Technology Heights" by the both the Libertarian Almanacs, "Freedom Vista" on the Captain's Club maps, "sector 7, cylinder 22" by MaxPower Delivery Co. reckoning, and "The Bug Zapper" for unknown reasons by the locals.

"This is it" Lawerence said, gesturing to a door marked "214 A/B". He looked to the men from MS13 Logistics, waiting for an okay to knock on the door.

The chief of the security squad gave a big smile, revealing a mouth full of silver teeth below his thick black handlebar mustashe before saying, "Go ahead esé.", and pointing to the 2 wireless doorbells haphazardly taped to the wall next to the door.

Lawerence, not realizing that the address he was given was for a duplex, wasn't sure which doorbell to ring. He figured he might as well go in alphabetical order and pressed the button with the A written on it in green Sharpie pen. A tinny electronic Yankee Doodle played behind the door and was interrupted by muffled voice yelling, "What do you want!".

"I'm looking for Niven Brosinski" Lawerence replied.

The same muffled voice let out a drawn out "Fffffffuuuuuuck! Try B, asshole."

Lawerence pressed the doorbell button marked B and a tinny electronic La Cucaracha played behind the door, interrupted by a second voice with a very inquisitive "Hello?"

"Is this Niven Brosinski?" Lawerence replied.

"Yes it is. May I ask what you want?"

Lawerence excitedly rubbed his hands together. "I'm Lawer-

ence Collins the third, CEO of CJD incorporated, and we're in the market for a device that can produce a lot of heat and electricity, and I hear you can build such a device. I'm willing to pay you handsomely to build it and offer a lucrative multi-year contract to manage it."

The door to 214 A/B opened, and there stood Niven Brosinski, a lanky middle aged man with a pockmarked face. He glanced back into a dim closet sized room with a single bunk bed. On the bottom bunk, a sweaty naked man with a shaggy red beard was writhing against a pillow with a blue haired cartoon character drawn on it. The man paused long enough to shout "Shut the door asshole!" and another drawn out "Fffffff" was cut off as Brosinski stepped out into the corridor and closed the door.

"Um, ah, um..." Brosinski muttered while trying to gather his focus. "Yes. I have designed a fast neutron beta voltaic breeder reactor. Completely revolutionize the power industry. Not only does it generate substantial heat, but it creates a charged gas which produces electricity without the need of costly steam turbines. Theoretically, it never has to be refuelled! I call it The Bro-actor."

"How about we go somewhere more suitable to discuss business." Lawrence offered to Brosinski, while glancing over to the representatives from MS13 Logistics.

The smile was now long gone from the security chief's face. He crossed his arms across his large chest, made even larger from the layers of body armor. "Meat and minutes, we ain't interested in anything else right now."

Lawrence pulled a well worn mp3 player from his coat pocket and ran his thumb along the screen as he browsed through his company's inventory and ledger. He looked the MS13 man in the eyes and said, "600 cans of Alpo Beef with Gravy and 10,000 minutes of DigiNet".

The MS13 man shook his head. "DigiNet is no good here.

Tele-King or any subsidiary of the Omni Mundo Network.”

Lawrence reached into a couple more pockets, pulled out three phones and began a careful balancing act as he switched between them transferring DigiNet minutes between networks and exchanges till he had 12,300 Tele-King minutes to go with the 600 cans of Alpo. After getting the approval of the MS13 security detail along with the receipt of the minutes transfer and a photo of the cases of Alpo with a matching checksum for shipment by MaxPower Delivery, Lawrence and Brosinski were free to leave.

Behind the 10 feet of scrap metal, were 2 fully functional first generation Bro-actors and a second generation Bro-actor that had suffered a “misalignment” and “containment breach”. Lawrence would never learn more about the incident because the supervisors he would be expecting reports from were all dead. Forever entombed in the hot poisonous atmosphere of the reactor room.

The one who had managed to live long enough to escape the reactor room ranted like a mad man about the absolute need to completely seal off the reactor. And when he explained, while his skin fell off his body by the hand full, that even Lawrence himself would die, Lawrence Collins III made a deal with the devil to make sure that room was sealed.

The man in the tattered gray leather ran a gloved hand over his matted beard while he waited for a response from Lawrence.

Lawrence was still clutching the charts showing that the remaining reactors were producing water at twice the rate of the tire/garbage mixture he had been burning. And not only did he have the electricity to provide 24 hour service to all his tenants now, he had enough to sell almost a million fully charged AA cell derivatives per day on the electricity markets.

The cost had been making a deal with a company called Up-Right Savlage. The only company with the knowledge and expertise to patch up a mess like this. Unfortunately, due to the peculiar nature of there sort of work, Up-Right had some rather peculiar demands for payment.

“Well Collins, did we hold up our end of the bargain?”, slurred the man in the tattered gray leathers. Some of his business associates had started to gather around, also dressed in an assortment of patchwork leather, goggles, pads, face masks and carrying power tools that defied description.

After another long pause Lawrence replied, “Yes. Yes, you held up your end.”

“Time for you hold up yours Collins.” Barked the man in leather as he slid the goggles back over his eyes. “You got 1 minute to get behind the barricades, then we get 1 hour to do as we will to anything that ain’t nailed down.”

Lawrence corrected him, “Well, ‘not nailed down’ as defined in our contract under section...”

“Get movin’ Collins!” Bellowed the man in gray leather as he wrapped a length of chain around his knuckles.

Lawrence joined the rest of the CJD Management Team, as they sprinted out of and across the deck of The Dong to the safety of the barricades on the stern of the Jasmine Pride, marking an official boundary of the looting spree. The other boundary was at the midsection of The Dong, protecting the reactors and water factory on the back half.

Once behind the barricades, an air horn blew a long piercing note. The 50 some salvagers, who had been working around the clock for the last week sealing the reactor, dropped what they were doing and swarmed over the front half of the ship. They popped in and out of hatches, open containers and threw out the contents, taking what struck their fancy. One skipped about using a large crescent wrench to smash every piece of glass.

A dozen of them swarmed the hatch to the debtors quarters. For 10 minutes Lawerence watched as that group of salvagers cheered while pulling women and young men up on to the deck and picked over them like brokers at the fish markets.

Had the salvagers failed at their task, the deal was they got the whole ship, but only for a half an hour. Then the Dong was to be sunk as part of the secondary back-up containment plan. The rest of the secondary back-up containment plan was mostly about how Lawerence would liquidate CJD Inc, buy a few more old container ships and start over on the other side of Libertalonesia. Or whatever the marketing geniuses down on Rand Plaza were calling it these days.

Once the salvagers began doing the things of nightmares to the debtors, Lawerence thought how it would be a great time to get all the senior management together at the mall's food court.

Having 2 of the 3 reactors functioning was still cause for celebration and there was a new restaurant that did amazing things with Vienna Sausages. It was also a good time to start strategizing over which electricity markets to monopolize first.

Epilogue

By Beowulfs_Ghost

He looked up at the bright blue ceiling above his bed and felt...

Nothing.

Empty.

Numbness.

He would have thought he felt dead inside, but dead sounded like defeat and Lawrence Collins III wasn't a loser. He continued to just silently lay there as the housekeeper climbed off of him, pulled her bright blue "CJD Maintenance Staff" shirt back on and, without bothering with any other clothing, went and joined the other housekeepers who were busy using butter knives to chip dried food off plates and bowls.

Collins had a lot of reasons to feel great, and a few reasons to feel stupid. But what was getting him down was a nagging feeling that it was all going to end soon. The recent news of an approaching UN "relief" flotilla, which was only going to "observe" and "offer aid if requested", wasn't helping his mood.

In less than a decade, he had built more than his father or grandfather had built in their whole lives. It was only possible because he went to the one place on Earth where losers and parasites couldn't drag him down. Shipping, manufacturing, housing, nuclear energy, banking, a major success after another.

He even won a bid for a seat in the exclusive Captains Club, a gathering of the most powerful and influential people in Freedopolis. But for a while now, it was as if some small voice in the back of his mind kept reminding him, "something just isn't right, you know this will all come tumbling down".

He should be feeling great because a plan he had hatched

with a couple other members of the Captains Club was paying off more than expected for the 3rd year in a row. CJD Inc. now had an Entertainment Division, and 4 stories below, in the cargo hold of the Jasmine Pride, they were putting on “CJD Inc. presents; Saturnalia in Atlantis”.

It started with high stakes card games and live orgies. As the tourists brought in desperately needed foreign currency, Lawerence kept instructing his managers to find ways to supply the insatiable demand. And with new supply came new demands. His division meetings, once dominated by kiloliters of water, megawatts of electricity and container utilization had, over the course of the last few years, taken a turn for the macabre.

He was looking forward to the increase in capital reserves next week, but not to the charts, graphs and presentations explaining how it came to be. Cost/return averages for sex acts, broken down by men, women, boys, girls, trannies, tranny-children, furry, furry-amputee, live and dead. Lawerence had though a dead hooker wouldn't get repeat customers, until the boys in accounting found out they do and and how it follows a curve. There will be another fresh batch of research on gambling on sex, sex on death, drugs on sex, gambling on death by drugs. Permutations as endless as the demand.

Somewhere below him, Lawerence knew a group of people were playing Russian Roulette with live ammo and bets were being placed on how many hard boiled eggs fit in the ass of a washed up singer. In the theater, two extremely overweight women were smothering people to death at another sold out show. The store next door was selling wallets made from breasts and coffee mugs made of baby skulls, all real human. For the right price, they'll make an entire one-piece skin suit.

GenetiFlux Labs rented a stall and had color brochures and financing plans on things called “dick nipples” and “manginas” and stuff people wouldn't even admit to dreaming about.

The heiress to a sugar fortune wanted some eunuchs, and wanted to watch them be made. Three stock brokers from London wanted to beat to death a old man in a fox costume. An army general from Chile wanted a dinner themed after some old movie called “Salò”. They came with their money and left as satisfied customers of CJD Entertainment.

Supply and demand, demand and supply, the iron law of nature, physics, the gods themselves. As true as A is A. When all the demand is met, they’ll import more, and without the international markets, this experiment in true freedom would have stagnated.

Above the bright blue ceiling at which Lawerence gazed, the low beating sound of one of CJD Inc’s bright blue surplus Hind helicopters was getting louder. Another group of high rollers, thrill seekers and voyeurs arriving for the festivities. The housekeeper came back over to the bed, pulled up a corner of the sheet and used it to wipe down the inside of her thighs. She paused when she noticed Lawerence’s lips moving, but couldn’t make what he said over the helicopters. “What is it, Captain Collins?” she asked, dropping the sheet and bending down closer. But all she could make out was; “The Demand! The Demand!”

Debt, Libertarian Style

By Beowulfs_Ghost

It was early in the morning, and a creature that was part man, part machine and thought of himself as all dragon, furiously pedalled a generator in the middle of a dark alley. The dark alley was made of 2 massive stacks of shipping containers, ten stories tall, enveloped in a gauze of stairs, catwalks, ladders, pipes and cables.

In the alley, everything was earth tones of dull reds and browns, although there was nothing that could properly be labelled “earth” for a thousand miles. The ends of the container stacks had thickly painted advertisements on them. One was for CJD Inc. bottled water, and featured the upper body of a nude women with ample breasts and a bottle of CJD Water wedged between them. Where her head would have been was the bright blue CJD logo. The other container stack was a solid slate gray, and in giant red letters read, “CJD WATER MAKE YO DICK FALL OFF -- HUMBERT WATER 4 LIFE”.

Below the left breast of the CJD Water mascot, 3 men in black and red outfits made of nylon straps, holsters and plastic pads kicked away the garbage looking for a place to sit down. Another man wearing a black trench coat over a baby blue track suit, waist length hot pink hair trailing over the 2 katanas strapped to his back, peered down the alley.

The 3 men in the black and red outfits were Aldridge, Schmidt and Rodriguez. The one in the pink hair, who was part German, part Irish and thought himself to be a modern day Samurai, was Kevin MacDonald. But those who didn’t want to find out the last time those kanatans had been sharp-

ened called him Kashiro. Kashiro the debt collector, a District Manager for Psycho Hawk Debt Solutions, waited with the Junior Associates for an opportune time to collect a debt.

"We'll wait for the Malatoran to leave. He won't have more than 20 minutes left on his shift." Kashiro said, as he squatted down in the 6 foot wide garbage free patch his men had cleared. He pulled a Hello Kitty satchel out from under his trench coat and began to rummage around.

"Are those dragon things really cyborgs?", Aldridge asked.

"That metal suit is real enough", Kashiro replied, as he loaded a pinch of Wild Berry Meth into a long clear glass pipe to begin his "Power Up" ritual. He had learned the hard way that, a man in a metal suit or robot with a human brain, there wasn't a katana on the Liberatoll that could penetrate it.

"So, why are we after these guys? What did they do?", asked Rodriguez.

"They owe some money. Why do you care?", Kashiro said and then took a pull off his pipe.

"Just looking for some motivation. I guess, I just want..."

"This is all the motivation you need.", Kashiro cut him off, offering the pipe that smelled vaguely of strawberries and strongly of burnt plastic. Rodriguez wasn't interested. "The dispatch said the five of them are shareholders for a company in debt for 20,000 Wyatt Petrobucks."

"By the Gods of Asgard!", Schmidt exclaimed.

"Well, that was before the troubles in the refinery district. Petrobucks weren't worth as much when they borrowed them.", Kashiro said as he tucked the pipe back into his satchel, satisfied with the Power Level he was achieving. "Any way, Psycho Hawk has a guarantee from GenetiFlux Labs. They'll pay the debt at triple-B rating so long as we deliver them in at least C condition."

Schmidt shook his head. "That's still pretty fucked up how that dude blew up the debtors housing and took half the re-

finery district down with it.”

“Fucked up?!?!”, Kashiro’s blood was starting to race. “They hired an architect to design the corporate offices, and then they turned around and used those plans for fucking debtors quarters. What did they expect would happen when you trample on a great man’s vision like that?”

Schmidt and Rodriguez looked at each other, and without saying a word, realized that this topic was just going to piss off their boss. Lucky for them Aldridge still had his mind on cyborg dragons.

“I still don’t get it...” Aldridge said, “Are they like brains in a jar, or exo-skeletons, or what?”

Rodriguez smirked. “You should ask Schmidt. He’s a customer of GenetiFlux Labs.”

Aldridge turned to Schmidt, eyes wide.

“Well, I’m not into the cyber-punk scene. I just went there for the gene therapy”, and Schmidt rolled up one pant leg, revealing dark chocolate brown skin, vividly contrasting his tanned white arms and face. “I’ll get everything above the waist done once I pay the legs off”.

“You now hung like like a brother too?” Rodriguez quipped.

“Nah, that’s a different procedure.” Schmidt said sullenly. “But they offer it. Up to 10 of them, but you need to get an upgraded heart to handle the blood flow. They also do cybernetics. Both nano-polymer enhancement, and completely mechanical. Arms, legs, hearts, eyes...”

Kashiro really wanted his eyes done. He wanted a face to match his Samurai soul, and robotic eyes to give him an edge over his adversaries. He was still haunted by the fact that he largely got his job as District Manager because the previous one got some cyber-eyes that didn’t work out so well. He was last seen screaming “Green lasers in my brain!” before throwing himself over the side of a ship.

The sound of chains and gears wound down and was re-

placed by the hollow clunks of heavy steel feet on the steel deck plates. Two minutes later the mechanical dragon was gone and the crew from Psycho Hawk Debt Solutions were standing in the middle of the alley, checking their weapons and looking up to a door three stories up the stack of containers.

“It had to be on the damn 3rd floor” Rodriguez complained, as the four of them surveyed the tangled web of ladders and balconies looking for some place they could all fit to stage their raid, but none could be found. The doors to some of the other containers were creaking open as people were starting their day. Some faces popped out and popped back in quickly when they saw the Psycho Hawk uniforms.

“We’ll have to wait for them to come out.” Kashiro said, as he took his eyes off the wall of containers and surveyed the rest of the alley. Then he surveyed his employees and looked over their gear. “Or we smoke them out. Rodriguez, you take all the incendiary rounds. Schmidt, Aldridge, rock-salt loads only. Remember, grade C, they need to be alive and responsive.”

As the 3 Junior Associates exchanged drums of ammo, Kashiro pulled his Hello Kitty sachel out, unzipped the side pouch and picked through a rainbow assortment of shotgun shells. Choosing 4, he reached in under his left arm and produced a revolver that was part drunken wager, part overcompensation, and thought of as the ultimate in free market self defence. With a flick of the wrist, the Shepard & Wong Gentelman’s 12 Semi-auto hinged open, and Kashiro loaded the 4 shells into the massive cylinder. They finalized the details of the plan and split up. Schmidt and Aldridge to the port end of the alley, Kashiro to the starboard. Rodriguez stayed in the middle.

Rodriguez knew why he was picked to stay in the alley. As a former US Marine, he was the only one who had any training

or real experience with these kinds of weapons. But he had heard the siren song of big money in private military. Now he was kicking himself for passing up the job offer from Max-Power Delivery. Psycho Hawk's training was a joke. Just a 2 hour orientation video. 10 minutes of explaining the need to check your weapon's manual for details, and an hour and 50 minutes of how stealing weapons, ammo and office supplies was bad. The fucking manual was in Chinese!

Didn't matter now, it was time to rock-n-roll, and at least he had a job, unlike the poor slobs he was about to wake up. He put the automatic shotgun to his shoulder, sighted in on the dead beats' door, switched the safety off and let loose a 3 round burst. A quick steady crack-crack-crack reverberated up and down the alley. And then another, and another. Each time a group of white fireballs leaped up and burst into a shower of sparks. The embers raining down, dancing though the cat walks like some giant psychedelic pachinko machine.

By the 5th burst, between the impacts and heat of the rounds, and the general rust and disrepair of the container, one of the fireballs disappeared through the door rather than bursting into spark on it. 2 more burst, a few more fireballs in the container, and the door flew open. Rodriguez ejected the incendiary drum and slapped in the rock-salt drum as he ran to join Kashiro.

Schmidt and Aldridge counted as 2, 4, 7, 10 people scurried out of the container and climbed up, down and sideways through the jungle gym of pipes and ladder. The 2 of them squeezed off individual shots and watch as their targets flinched and yelped. One fell back, caught his leg in a ladder and hung there upside down. Another fell and got wedged between a couple now broken sewer pipes. 3 others either passed out or laid down in defeat on the cat walks above. 2 reached the ground, and then collapsed as Schmidt switched to full auto and sprayed them with his 10 remaining rounds.

2 others reached the ground and ran towards the starboard end of the alley, and 1 managed to get to the roof of the container stack.

As the 2 dead beats made it to the starboard end of the alley, Rodriguez dove out from behind a garbage pile he was using for cover and drove the butt of his shotgun into the dead beat's stomach. The dead beat doubled over, rolled 6 feet, and Rodriguez pounced on him with a handful of thick black zip-strips. In seconds the dead beat was hog tied, gulping for air and dry heaving.

The other dead beat had a piece of broken iron he had torn off the cat walks and was swinging it wildly as he ran towards Kashiro. Kashiro drew one of his swords, and in his mind, cut the head of the assailant clean off, releasing a geyser of blood. In reality, the sword crashed into the dead beat's shoulder and became wedged under his collar bone. As the dead beat tumbled forward the sword was wrenched from Kashiro's hands.

Rodriguez was already there to cuff him and let out a loud "What the fuck is this shit!". Kashiro looked down the alley. Schmidt was covering the dead beats down on the deck, while Aldridge scaled his way up to the others. Both gesturing and yelling about the one that escaped. Kashiro turned and ran towards the next alley.

He got there just in time to see the escapee getting down at the far end and turning to run towards the bow. Kashiro drew his Gentleman's 12 and gave pursuit, but he was a good 100 feet behind him, and the crowds were getting too thick to get a good shot. After crossing over another ship, the dead beat was approaching a tollbooth and a gangway leading to an over grown oil platform. An amorphous rust colored cloud of trusses, cables and corrugated steel. Kashiro really didn't want to go in there, so he put both hands on his pistol, took aim at the dead beat as he slowed down at the crowd outside the toll booth, and pulled the trigger.

It was like some one had hit him in the hands with a baseball bat. Kashiro fought to both maintain his grip on the gun with his now numb hands, while pedalling backward to get his feet under himself before he fell on his ass. The crowd ahead of him, pelted with chunks of salt, panicked and crashed through the toll booth, then split up as some fled while others started demolishing and looting the toll booth.

The escapee, now trapped between a rioting mob on the bridge and a stumbling Kashiro, ran over to the railing on the side of the ship and looked over. Then looked back over his shoulder at Kashiro, who had now regained his balance.

Kashiro took aim with the Gentleman's 12 again, but his hands were too numb to pull the trigger. And then the escapee swung his legs over the railing and slid off. When Kashiro got there, he noticed a massive hill of garbage wedged between the 2 ships and the platform. The escapee had slid down it and was zig-zagging his way across the compacted garbage that covered the sea between the ships. Kashiro took aim and fired one more time. The gun and his arms came crashing into his face, knocking him flat on his ass.

Kashiro sat there, momentarily stunned. At the sounds of gun fire and screams from the remains of the toll booth he shook his head, stood up and looked back over the edge of the railing. Between the play of shadows and light in the narrow spaces between the ships, Kashiro could just make out the escapee rounding another hill of garbage before vanishing from view.

Kashiro made his way back to his associates. The escapee was as good as dead now. If he was lucky, the other dead beats who lived down in The Cracks would make a stew out of him. Or worse, if the rumors of a group known as The Collectivists were true, then his very humanity would be destroyed. Driven into a zombie like existence of "each according to his needs" and "one man, one vote".

Almost back to the alley, and Schmidt came jogging up holding out a blood drenched sword. Kashiro took his sword back, and started wiping it off with a stray plastic bag he snatched from the ground.

Schmidt explained how they had all 5 of the shareholders and 2 more with some outstanding debt. The 2 others were released, and as far as anyone could figure, the 1 who ran didn't have any debt at all.

Kashiro's Day Off

By Beowulfs_Ghost

A woken to the upbeat tempo chirping from a well worn cell phone, Kashrio reached under his cot. He searched around for a couple seconds before finding a cable, and then carefully followed it to a large alligator clip. He picked up the clip and stabbed around for a bit till a crackling sound a whiff of ozone exposed his target.

A quick "snap" as he released the clip and his modestly furnished "double-wide" 20ft. container was bathed in the bluish light of a dozen strips of LEDs taped along the perimeter of the ceiling. A small clock radio on the floor next to the cot also sprang to life. "12:00" urgently blink across the front, and out of the small speaker on the top came;

"...next song comes to us/Hey, get off my frequency/where it hit number 5 on the Swedish/I'm talking to you, asshole!/don't consider it to be truly a form of/Listen man, I was here first. You can pick some other channel to play your Euro-trash bullshit/but any way here it is, Kill My Death by Stru/Not that cry-baby shit again..."

Kashiro reached over and flipped the off switch on the radio. He then flopped back in into his cot, closed his eyes and for a few minutes just listened to the hum of life reverberating through the steel structure that spread across the ocean waves like bacteria in a petri dish. He had worked 14 hour days for the past 2 weeks to get into the raffle. And he won!

A vacation. One whole day off from work.

He wasn't going to waste it by sitting in bed though. He had plans. After a breakfast of shrimp paste and noodles, he grabbed 3 bottles of Humbert Ind. Utility Water, washed his long pink hair and took a sponge bath. Then he picked out

his cleanest trench coat, his 2 best katanas and went out for a day of adventure.

Kashiro's trip to the Liberty Bell Arms Expo wasn't going as smoothly as he had hoped. He was standing amongst the gawkers listening to a small war rage on some 100 meters into the maze of containers ahead of them. A cacophony of pops, cracks and thumps punctuated by the roar of something like a giant air wrench.

Since the battle was between MS13 Logistics and MaxPower Delivery, it was going to last well into the night. This was double torture for Kashiro. He really wanted to get to the arms market now and find out about this new roaring gun. Only an American could think up a weapon like that, and all the American expats had booths at Liberty Bell. But the only way around the battle was an ominous structure to his right. It rose into the sky like a jagged rusty storm cloud.

The oil platform turned food processing plant turned philosophical paradox was one of the first victims of the Seaweed Riots. The structure that no business wanted to admit a claim to became a home for things no one wanted to exist. There were a thousand slang terms for the place, and more were invented every day. On most maps it was an unlabelled grey square, but above every door leading into it was written "Acceptance". Kashiro looked up at the one above him, written by hand in thin yellow paint, and broke the safety tab off his 16oz disposable flame thrower before heading in.

Of all the markets here, Kashiro loved the arms markets the most. No axiom was as true as, "An armed society is a polite society". And of all the arms markets, Kashiro loved the Liberty Bell Arms Expo the most, because they actually spray

painted that saying on the walls. Along with the official store policy that “The punishment for rudeness is Death”, and a paid security detail that enforced it.

The strict rules were worth it though, as the USA produced some of the greatest weapons geniuses the world had ever seen, and when they became fed up with their government’s oppressive taxes and regulation, the Liberty Bell is where they usually ended up. Located in the cargo hold of an old dry bulk freighter, it was a small city made of angle iron, bungee cord and tarpaulin. Liberty Bell’s security staff kept watch from the deck above. Armed with scoped rifles, they were the stalwart defenders of congeniality.

There was some browsing and stocking up Kashiro needed to do, but first he wanted to find out about the roaring gun, and he knew exactly the man to talk to. As he wound his way through the crowds and around the stalls, dealers made their sales pitches.

“...and a 60 yard effective range on disposable co2 cartridges. We offer a variety of darts in a range of dosages. Ruffies, PCP, STX, live biological payloads. Try our sampler pack.”

“Available in 90, 180, and 360 degree models, it will cause permanent blindness within 30 feet and will continue causing damage up 100 feet. Can be used individually or daisy-chained up to...”

“You want magazines? We got magazines. Standard, extended, double-ended extended. Epoxy bodies and Teflon internals means smooth action and a long corrosion free life.”

Kashiro saw the sign he was looking for. Written in aluminum tape on a black tarp was “Blitzer Custom Shot”. Below the sign, a tall thin man with silver hair, deep set gray eyes and almost gray skin carefully poured gun powder onto a scale.

“Hey Lars. You know anything about a gun that roars?” Kashiro asked.

Lars gave Kashiro a knowing look, and then went back to reading his scale.

Kashiro pulled a Wyatt Petrobuck single out his pocket, slid it across the table towards Lars and said, "Sounds like a giant..."

"Air wrench?" Lars finished as he placed his long bony index finger on the Petrobuck. He smirked, "This wouldn't have anything to do with MaxPower, would it?"

"It might.", Kashiro said abruptly.

Lars scowled, and pushed the Petrobuck back across the table. Kashiro picked it up, put it back in his pocket and said, "They've been fighting MS13 just outside the Meth District since daybreak. It's moving slowly, but MaxPower is definitely making progress."

"Interesting", Lars said, rubbing his chin. "The gun you are looking for is called the Rebel Yell, and is made by an outfit called White Lightning Firearms. You'll find them port side, aft."

Kashiro thanked him and made his way over to the White Lightning booth. He found it easily, because instead of the walls made of blue, green or black tarpaulin, it was done up in crisp white bed sheets and Confederate Flags. At a folding card table, a man in black slacks and a white polo shirt gave Kashiro a disapproving look.

"I hear you are the one to ask about the Rebel Yell", Kashiro asked.

The man in the polo shirt gave a quick shrug. "You heard right. My name's Jim, and the Rebel Yell is right back hear.", and gestured for Kashiro to follow him behind a bed sheet divider.

There, was the most amazing gun Kashiro had ever seen. The display featured a titanium white mannequin holding a matte black gatling gun with a corrugated hose connected to a backpack. Jim started into his spiel, gesturing at various

parts along the way.

“The Rebel Yell features 7 carbon fiber barrels for excellent thermal expansion characteristics and low rotational mass. The light weight theme is continued throughout the product with the use of aluminum framing. All powder coated of course. Selectable fire rate, from 500 to 3000 rounds per minute, in increments of 10. Completely solid state firing logic, it uses optical sensors for spin rate and breach state, controlling a 1 horse electric motor. To keep total cost of ownership down, it fires .22LR, stored in three 1000 round user selectable drums on the backpack. This kit here, with 3000 rounds and 2 batteries, is about 65 pounds. Available options are; folding tripod, Corinthian leather, gold trigger contacts...”

“How much does it cost!”, Kashiro absent mindedly blurted out, lost in visions of using that beast to cut entire ships in half.

Jim put his hands in his pockets, and gave Kashiro a stern look. “If you have to ask, you can’t afford it.”

“What?”, Kashiro snapped out of his day dream.

“No offence, but if your name doesn’t end in ‘Inc’ or ‘Corp’, it’s out of your price range.”

Kashiro picked a table close to the price board and started looking over the menu. Next to the individual items were 1 or 2 stars. Dishes had 3 to 5. One went as high as 10. On the price board was 2 lists of common currencies and the current price of a “star” written next to them in dry-erase pen. Above the price board, a cheerful sign explained how the prices could be checked at WagnerCafe.com on Diginet, TheRealWagnerCafe.com on Tele-King and el-cafe-de-wagner.r1.zzt on CompuMundo.

When the waiter came by, Kashiro ordered 1 can of turkey in gravy, 2 servings of ramen, a side of cheese product and

corkage for the bottle of water he had brought along. Double checking that no one was about to change any of the prices on the board, he pulled out a 1 Wyatt Petrobuck note and handed it over to the waiter. With machine like efficiency, the waiter expertly folded the paper money into fifths, tore off a fraction and dropped it on the table. Kashiro picked up the change and put it in his pocket.

It was almost midnight and Kashiro was walking around the perimeter of the top deck of a large circular structure. It was one of the 3 districts that claimed to be “The Pleasure Dome”. This one was known as “30-17” by it’s patrons, because that’s where it was on MaxPowers Delivery’s maps.

Kashiro came to 30-17 to go on a date. The perfect ending to an awesome vacation. He moved purposefully down the surprisingly clean gently curving path. A tubular metal railing on his left, and on the right a 20 foot metal wall broken by the occasional alley leading into the center of “The Pleasure Dome”. Above, beams of red and green light reflected off the brown haze. Laughter and chatter blended with pulsating electronic music in the distance. But some of that laughter and chatter was approaching.

Ahead, in the alley way that Kashiro had been making his way towards, the chatter became the distinct voices of 3 young women talking about shoes. Soon after a group of people emerged and gather by the railing. As Kashiro approached, he made out 4 large men tightly wrapped in gray camo and body armor, standing in a loose semi circle, facing outward. Behind them, 3 fashionably dressed young women. One of the girls continued to prattle on about shoes while the other 2 wiggled their beared butts between the rails and began relieving themselves.

As Kashiro continued his purposeful pace, one of the guard

stepped forward, drew his pistol and said, "Excuse me. You're going to have to find another..."

In the blink of an eye, Kashiro grabbed a sword and brought it down on the forearm holding the pistol. The pistol went skidding across the path. The guard wailed as he clutched his shattered arm, his hand was turning blue, crimson spreading across the gray camo sleeve. The other 3 guards began laughing hysterical.

Without even stopping, Kashiro turned and went down the alley. Behind him, one of the girls yelled "Loser!". Wondering if that was meant for him or the guard, he made a quick right turn and was at his destination.

Kashiro was a regular customer of the Cassandra's at 30-17. He stood in the familiar lobby and through the doorway to his right, looked into the familiar Quicky Bar. In the dark room, men were gathered around small tables and along the bar. Some were boisterous and others sullen. Fit middle aged women, in purple skirts and halter tops, mingled among them and offered drinks, pills and sexual favors.

Also in the lobby, at a desk at the far end, sat an overweight and balding man in a purple t-shirt. The name tag on his chest told any one who cared that he was Shift Manager Richard. Kashiro knew him as Rick.

"You're in early", Rick said, tidying up a stack of papers on his desk.

"I got the day off work.", Kashiro beamed.

"Excellent. I take it you are here for more than a quicky then?" Rick said while sliding out a flyer out of a large stack that was held down by some sort of home-made machine pistol.

"Indeed I am.", Kashiro replied. "I'm looking for a date."

"Excellent. Excellent. And what will you be paying with to-

night?”

Kashiro pulled a satchel out from under his trench coat, and withdrew a stained manilla envelope. He opened the envelope and carefully slid out a piece of paper covered in writing and bordered in elaborate engravings. He handed it to Rick and said, “One share of Rand Plaza Corporation”.

“That would get you 2 hours”, Rick said, while he carefully received the paper, checked both sides, and then held it up to the track lighting above him and studied it. He then laid it on the desk, picked up a small flashlight, and shined a violet light across it. The florescent green visage of an old woman scowled back.

“One share of Rand Plaza it is.”, he finally said, and then slid the paper through a slot in the wall behind him. Rick then gestured to a set of stairs to Kashiro’s left and said, “Enjoy your evening”.

Upstairs was a 40 foot long steel hallway painted in the trademark purple. Along each length were 5 large thick plexi-glass doors. At the far end sat a rather bored looking bouncer swinging a cattle prod on a chain. Kashiro strolled up and down the hall way several times. Two of the rooms had curtains drawn across the doors, but the other 8 were all painted the same thick purple, and in each one was a 20-something woman, a random bed and furnishings. Most were playing with cell phones, or folding laundry, or both. One, a short tan woman with jet black curly hair, was doing push-ups.

Kashiro hadn’t made up his mind yet when caught something from the corner of his eye. He stopped pacing and looked into the room and blinked a few times to make sure he wasn’t seeing double.

On a bed with a pink and white checkered sheet sat a woman in a white tank top and green sweat pants. She had reddish brown hair and clusters of freckles on her cheeks and shoulders. Her light brown eyes darted across the screen of a tablet

she had propped in he lap. Peaking up from the top of her tank-top was a pair of cleavage. She looked up, gave Kashiro a half smile, and went back to reading her tablet.

Kashiro reached over and pushed the intercom button. "So how much did that rack set you back?"

The half smile returned to her face as she came over to the door, put one hand on her hip, and the other on her end of the intercom. "Nothin'. They paid me.", and she gave a quick shake.

Kashiro was mesmerised as the three breasts swayed under the shirt, the outlines of three nipples visible through the thin material. He blinked again. "Wait. They paid you? Who's they?"

"GenetiFlux Labs", she replied. "I work for them as a beta tester. This...", she gestured around her room, "This is just a side job. Gets me my own room, security and free Diginet Premium. GenetiFlux is my steady paycheck, and the best part is they offer FluxBux. This...", she arched her back and the thin tank-top pulled tight across the row of breasts, "gets me 50 FluxBux a week for the 2 year study, and they've been one of the best performing currencies all year."

Kashiro was taken aback. "So you work in bio-tech and entertainment, and watch the currency markets?"

"Oh, I'm a trader on the currency markets.", she said, proudly pointing back to the tablet on the bed, graphs slowly updating across a screen bordered in duct tape. "That's the best part of getting paid in FluxBux. They're so in demand, I can convert them into damn near anything in minutes. I do day trading between dates here, or when I'm under observation at GenetiFlux. I almost got enough capital to buy my own Cassandra's franchise."

Kashiro had never met a girl with such business savvy before. "I don't know whether to discuss business or pleasure?", he said with a grin.

She glanced at the screen of a phone wired into the wall next to the intercom. “With the 2 hours you got, I think we could do both.”

“I want to see them first”, Kashiro haggled.

She rolled her eyes. “The name’s Terra, by the way.”, and the 3 perfectly symmetrical perky breasts bounced as she pulled the tank-top up over them. Kashiro stared back at the three pink nipples, gave a worried look at the faint scars that criss-crossed her small pot belly, and then returned his gaze to the bio-engineering marvel above. He was beginning to swoon over this almost perfect package of sex, charm, and rational utility maximization.

“It’s a date.”, Kashiro said.

Terra tapped a couple times on the phone wired into the wall and the thick plexi-glass door popped open.

The Rise, Fall and Rise of Kashiro

By Beowulfs_Ghost

It was the last place Kashiro wanted to be but he knew it was the only place they wouldn't pursue him. It didn't mean they wouldn't take a couple shots at him out of spite. And sure enough, as Kashiro zig-zagged his way across the compacted garbage, a strange hum few over his head and made twin "thumps" on the hull some distance ahead of him.

"Idiots!", he said to himself. Those shotgun bolos never worked right, and he had actually slapped his Junior Associates in the face for even having them. Kashiro's opinion of the debt collectors that pursued him instantly sank with the realization that they were the type to waste money on inferior weaponry. They continued to prove their incompetence by following him across three ships and continuing to fire at him from the decks above.

Kashiro needed a place to hide, and was just about to find it. Ahead of him was the slowly decaying pylon of an oil drilling platform, and where the pylon jutted down under the thick crust of jetsam was the crumpled remains of a large advertising banner. He stuck to the shadows to throw off his pursuers and then quickly darted under the dull yellow sheet of plastic.

The plastic had crumpled into a sort of tent, and Kashiro was pleasantly surprised to find it roomy enough to squat, rather than lay down, as he peered back out from under it, scanning the decks above for signs of the debt collectors. He was then unpleasantly surprised at the sounds of moans and shifting garbage behind him.

A thin man slowly emerged from under a blanket made of plastic bags. His clothes were tattered and patched with more

bits of plastic, his hair held down under a tightly tied plastic shopping bag.

“Disrespecting my right to capital accumulation...”, the bag man began to urgently mumble.

Kashiro told him to keep quiet in a hushed voice as the bag man’s ramblings grew louder. When Kashiro heard the man mumble “...paying customers only...”, he almost reflexively reached into the satchel under his trench coat and pulled out 2 packets of shrimp paste. He tossed them at the bag man and resumed his look out.

The bag man’s eye lit up and a shaky “All Right!” escaped his cracked lips. He reached down to where the packets had landed, but his trembling fingers paused mere inches away.

“Oh, that’s right...”, he quietly mumbled, and his trembling fingers came back up and began fumbling with the plastic rope that held up what was left of his pants. “...free and fair trade of goods for services...”, he continued mumbling.

Kashiro, seeing no signs of the debt collectors, turned back around to see the man struggling to remove his pants. “I just want to hide here for a bit. That’s all. Just sit here.”, Kashiro assured the wretch of a man.

The bag man froze, and after a moment blurted out “Deal!”, before lunging at the packets of Squeafood brand Travel-Sized Squeezable Seafood Product. Biting the ends off and squeezing the contents into his eager mouth and then carefully peeling the packets open and licking the inside of the plastic.

Now that the debt collectors had given him up for dead, Kashiro slumped back against a pile of yet more garbage. Under the faded yellow banner of a now defunct bank, he finally felt safe. No sooner had he finally felt a tinge of relief, he was awash in an almost suicidal depression.

Here sat Kashiro the debt collector. Self style neo-samurai and one time district manager for Psycho Hawk Debt Solutions. He was just now coming to the realization that, after years of working towards his dreams, his life had peaked a couple months ago, and within a matter of days he was now reduced to the lowest of the low. A dead beat parasite, wallowing in filth, next to a haggard man calling his dinner or shrimp paste “precious revenue”.

The way by which he travelled to the peak of his life was part the reason for his downfall. He had been doing well for himself for several years on this free market paradise adrift on the seas. A seemingly uncountable number of ships, platforms and bleeding edge budget naval architecture, organically lashed to one another as economics had demanded.

He made the move here from New Jersey after seeing a video on an internet comedy site, showing how this was the one place on Earth where men could still settle their disputes with a sword fight. He worked his way up in a profession that made use of his unique skills, and began earning enough to afford a regular long term girl friend. He missed her now, and her charts showing how mutually beneficial their relationship was.

But none of that was good enough. He wanted more, and then he learned that what he wanted had not only been invented, but was finally starting to get some positive reviews. He wanted a face to match his soul and the eyes of a hawk, and GenetiFlux Labs had both and a reasonable financing package. 20,000 FluxBux of debt later, he had his Japanese face with porcelain fair skin, and the GF-XTi cybernetic eyes.

And then he found out the eyes he got came with banner ads. GenetiFlux said that if he didn’t want the ads, he should have bought the GF-XTi Platinums. So he cashed out almost all of his digital currency savings to get his eyes “rooted” down at the Warez District.

And then he found out FluxBux were in short supply, and prices and availability were incredibly erratic. It was costing 3 weeks of pay to make a 1 week payment some times, if he was lucky to find any FluxBuxs at all. The only place that seemed to have a steady supply was a casino called Circus Atlantis, but rather than the usual card games, it had ones with strange names like “Prisoner’s Dilemma” and “Ultimatum Game”. Kashiro was soon banned from the establishment for arguing with the staff.

And then his boss fired him for his “use of The Royal We”, and made good on his threat to make sure Kashiro was “black balled” in the debt collection and security markets.

That didn’t matter though, because no one was going to hire him with the face he had now. After the raging 3 day meth binge he took after being fired, something gave way in his cosmetic surgery. The left half was still the most exquisite face to ever grace a Japanese Tea Ceremony, but the right was a Halloween mask dipped in flour. The other eye not only returned to normal, but was frozen in an exaggerated look of surprise.

Then he gathered up every last piece of scrip and stock he had, sold all but his 2 favorite katanas for a handful of S&W Steel Credits, and used it to pay the fee to spend one last evening with his girlfriend. Not 10 minutes after leaving the Pleasure Dome, the debt collectors were after him. With no place to go, he went where he had seen so many other dead beats throw themselves and never return. They called it The Cracks. The gaps between various structure pressed together to make this man made island. So filled with household garbage and industrial waste that it was mostly stable enough to walk on. Stable enough for Kashiro to sit on while deep in self pity.

The bag man was snoring now, having fallen asleep soon after his banquet of shrimp paste. Kashiro left, and started wandering the The Cracks, wondering what to do next. Even though it was before noon, it was still dark as twilight, the occasional spear of light playing off the sides of ship's hull high above. But Kashiro's eyes would make even a moonless night bright enough to read by, and was glad for it as it helped him navigate around the looser patches of jetsam.

Just as he was trying to think up a witty quip about how one shouldn't loan the eyes of a hawk to a neo-samurai, he heard a voice in an accent he couldn't quite place.

"Trespasser! Thief!"

Kashiro drew both his swords and replied, "I have taken nothing." Ahead of him, from behind the stern of a ship to his right, the form of a man emerged and began to slowly walk towards him.

"You lie!". It cried out in an almost inhuman voice. "You take what it mine, what I created, what I defended. All that is between these 2 ships in mine."

"I have taken nothing!", Kashiro repeated.

The man was now close enough to make out his features, but they were just as much a blur of scraps, garbage and gaunt human form as the bag man. Kashiro could also make out the source of strange accent. As the man opened his mouth to speak one last time, Kashiro could see the only teeth left in his mouth were the 4 canines. The creature spoke, "You steal my AIR!"

Kashiro's headache, from dehydration and withdraws, finally stopped but was replaced with full on delirium. He had run out of food, water and meth days ago, maybe. He wasn't sure when it was any more as the battery on his phone had died and The Cracks were in a perpetual state of twilight. He

had managed to find scraps of food and water. Sometimes rain water collected in wax paper wrappers and scraps of half eaten food that had blown down. Sometimes he took them from other denizens of The Cracks. Sometimes by threat and sometimes by force.

He stumbled down the corridor of garbage, dragging a chipped, blood encrusted sword. Kashiro had last seen the other sword being pulled into the murky seawater, embedded in the long writhing black tentacle that made him doubt his belief in Atheism.

Kashiro paused as he tried to sort out if what he was seeing ahead was real or delusions. Between the ships in the distance, a series of lights danced above the ground, like balls of yellow flame. Then a disembodied voice called out, "Hello friend!"

Kashiro did a slow stumbling turn, stabbing his sword into the ground for balance, searching for the source of the voice. His eyes bouncing in and out of focus as they tried to interpret the signals from his confused brain.

"I know that guy", said a second disembodied voice. "He's a debt collector!"

"You don't say...", said the first voice, as Kashiro watched the world fade to black.

Kashiro didn't know how long he was out. All he remembered was a parade of smiling faces and soothing voices offering cool water, warm broth and soft foods. Eventually he regained enough of his senses to sit up and wonder where he was at. He was in another plastic sheet tent, a rather large one, and his trench coat was draped over him like a blanket. A face poked in from between the plastic sheet doors, and then quickly pulled away.

"He's up.", said a voice Kashiro remembered from his black out.

"Better let Carl know." Said the other voice from the black

out.

Kashiro had sat up too quickly though, and again he watched the world fade to black.

Kashiro opened his eyes. He knew better than to sit up too quickly this time. He rolled over and noticed something different about the ground here. Instead of the usual haphazard tangle of jettisoned refuse, it was a neatly woven mat of plastic.

He slowly rolled himself on to his knees and waited to see if the blackness would return. It didn't, and he noticed he hadn't felt this good since he threw himself over that railing what seemed like ages ago. While pulling his trench coat back on, he also noticed his katana was missing.

Kashiro emerged from the tent and slowly stood up while taking in his surroundings. The familiar sight of the towering hulls of two ships were still there, but the ground again had a different quality. It had uniform smooth brownness to it. He was also frozen, partly from child like wonder and partly from his flight-or-fight response not coming to a resolution.

At least two dozen people moved about. They weren't quite as thin as the others Kashiro had seen down here and they were far more animate. Men busied themselves carrying stuff about and scratching at the ground, clad only in simple loin cloths and bright smiles. There were also a few women too, also wearing nothing but loin cloths and smiles, and they seemed to walk about freely as Kashiro saw no sign of anyone acting as an armed escort. Ahead he heard a voice call to him.

"Kashiro! Over here!", called out a man beckoning with his arms. He sat on a plastic bucket, and in front of him a yellow and blue flame danced at the end of a short piece of pipe poking up from the ground.

Kashiro quickly made his was to the beckoning man and asked, "Who are you, and how do you know my name?"

"My name is Carl", he replied in a friendly tone, "and men like you are well known to the peoples here."

Kashiro felt uneasy as he remembered the cry of "He's a debt collector!". Kashiro figured he might as well get it over with.

"Where is my sword?" Kashiro demanded.

"It's safe", Carl said in the same friendly tone, "And it will be returned to you. But first I just want to talk."

"Where am I?, Kashiro continued demanding.

"You are in our home Kashiro.", Carl said spreading his arms. "You may have heard us called 'The Collectivists', but we call ourselves The Human Beings. We've come here over the years, to escape the oppression above, and found our true nature down here."

Kashiro was puzzled for a moment as he tried to add up the high spirits of Carl and his companions. "Why have you not killed me? Why haven't you eaten me? How is it that you allow them to live?", Kashiro waved at the dozens of happy people going to and fro.

"First off", Carl said with an even bigger grin, "It is not my place to allow or disallow anything. And we haven't eaten you because nature provides", and Carl started gesturing around them.

Kashiro slowly turned to get a good look of the place and shock came over him as he realized he hadn't seen green like this that wasn't paint in many years. Up the hulls of the bordering ships grew thick mats of a kind of moss. At the base, small gardens of ferns, bamboo and blackberry vines sprang up and underneath the occasional yellow puff of a dandelion flower. Some people were tending the plants, and others harvested moss. A man wearing nothing but a tattered fedora was tending a pot hanging over another flaming pipe and a trio of women chatted while weaving a plastic mat.

“Besides the would be captains of industry that travelled here,” Carl continued, “other forms of life came as stow-aways. Below our feet, a variety of fungus binds the garbage together and slowly consumes it. Below that, a type of bacteria breaks it down further and produces methane. We tap the methane for heat and light. We also do our part, as we help the other life, nurturing the plants and laying new soil.”

A woman came up to them. She was wearing a stained denim skirt, her brownish hair pulled up with an elaborate red bow, and was positively beaming as she handed two bowls to Carl.

“Thank you Marlene”, Carl said, and the woman skipped away. Carl then held one of the bowls out to Kashiro and offered, “Why don’t you have a seat?”

Kashiro felt slightly embarrassed. “I didn’t bring a chair with me, and a don’t have anything to pay for a rental chair.”

Carl laughed and then pointed over to another plastic bucket topped with a crocheted plastic cushion. “You can use that one.”

“Who owns it?”, Kashiro asked.

Carl laughed again. “It belongs to everyone Kashiro.” And Kashiro had the first of a series of epiphanies that came to him over the next few weeks.

“So that’s you mean by the alienation from the means of production.” Kashiro said as he smiled. He was happy with his new found knowledge, and the long talks he had been having with Carl. He also found satisfaction working with The Human Beings over the past month or so. Gathering water and tending the gardens, working together, eating together, even sleeping together as there was just one large communal tent.

Carl’s ever present smile started to dim a bit, and the vanished. “I enjoy these discussion we have Kashiro. I really do. But there is another matter that I can’t put off any longer.”

Kashiro had never seen Carl so serious. "What is it?"

"First, I have to tell you how I got here. I came here 5 years ago after earning my masters in economics at the University of Chicago. I wanted to see what I had spent my life studying in action, unhindered. At first things were great. I had no trouble finding odd jobs here and making money back home with the papers I was writing. Then I went to a new casino called Circus Atlantis because I heard they had some interesting takes on old game ideas."

"I know that casino. Those games were ridiculous." Kashiro said.

"The way they presented them was pretty odd." Carl said, a smile momentarily returning to his face. "But I was very good at them. I mean really good. I went in there one day and walked out a billionaire." Carl then paused, realizing that Kashiro was probably used to treating billions of currency as no big deal. "I walked out with 23 million FluxBux, but it was all gone by the next day."

Kashiro's jaw dropped. "I had problems getting 60 FluxBuxs a week and you just walking into Circus Atlantis and got 23 million and just blew it!"

"Yes" Carl replied. "And from all the stories of FluxBux troubles you've told, it sounds like people are doing exactly what I did years ago. And I'm glad for it."

"You see Kashiro," Carl continued, "After winning all those games, something clicked. It's as if I could see the whole the future unfolding before my eyes, and I found I didn't like it. I gave away all my FluxBux. I just dumped them on the steps of Circus Atlantis, and was planning on just going back home. Then I noticed people down between the ships, and thought about writing one last case study before leaving for good, but then I decided to try and change the world, rather than just study it."

Kashiro sat there for a moment, taking all this in, but it

didn't really make much sense to him. "So what kind of pressing matter is this?"

Carl sat there, trying to find a way to say it. "Kashiro, there is a grave problem facing us all. Like, the entire planet. It can be stopped now, but it takes some one with skills. Skills such as yours, Kashiro."

Carl thought for a bit more, and then said, "Circus Atlantis is actually owned by GentiFlux labs, and the whole thing is sort of a big scam. But it's more than just rents and recapitalization, and creating demand. GenetiFlux has bigger plans, and those plans may mean the end of humanity as we know it. And it can all be stopped right now, but it means killing some one. It means killing the man who controls GenetiFlux, Circus Atlantis and a dozen other companies, and it means getting into Rand Tower to do it."

"Who is it?" Kashiro asked, the old flame of violent justice being rekindled in his heart.

"His name is Marcus Friedman, and I have a plan...", Carl said while pulling some folded paper out from the pockets of his cut-off black slacks.

Kashiro and Carl spent several hours going over the ways which Kashiro could get into the tower and to his target. Where security would and wouldn't be and in what numbers. He told Kashiro to go see Manny about getting back up to the decks, and Kashiro quickly left to begin his grand quest. About a minute after Kashiro left, the man who never wore anything except an old stained fedora walked up to Carl and handed in him a small cell phone.

"I made contact, and it's going to go down just like you asked." the man in the fedora said, and then he added, "Why did you get that kid going on plans of storming the gates and stuff?"

Carl's smile returned to his face, "He needed some motiva-

tion.”

Kashiro approached Manny and Marlene, his guides back to the decks above, and his first stop on his mission to save the world. Kashiro had gotten to know couple well over the past couple months, searching for water with Manny and learning to cook from Marlene. Manny was sitting cross legged on the ground, wearing his kilt made from the legs of several pants. He was running a file over the sharp angle on the end of his pipe-spear. Marlene had lain her pipe-spear on the ground and was unwrapping the long red piece of plastic she used to tie up her long brown hair. As her hair came down, Kashiro saw long gray streaks in it which he had never noticed before.

Marlene had unfolded the red plastic into a wide strip and was wrapping it across her large sagging breasts while she explained, “We go down this way, 4 ships, then go right, past the platform to another row of ships. There is a sort of hill.”

She stretched a couple times to test the quality of her make-shift tube top before picking up her spear and continuing, “And you’ll uses these to climb up it, up to the decks.”

The three of them walk in silence so to not attract an unwanted attention. And after an uneventful one hour journey, they had arrived at a large hill of loose garbage leaning against a ship. Kashiro hugged his two friends, took the pipe-spears and stabbing them into the garbage, used them to pull himself up the precarious slope. Before reaching the deck, he tossed the spears back down to Manny and Marlene, and waved goodbye before reaching up and pulling himself over the railing.

The Sun had just set when Kashiro set foot on what was on one of the housing ships in the Meth District. This was double lucky for Kashiro. For one, no one here would notice or care that a dead beat just climbed out of The Cracks. And two, he hadn’t had any meth in a long time and it was exactly

what he needed to sharpen his wits before the battle that lay ahead of him. He had vision of a fighting his way all the way up Rand Tower, the bodies of a million headless gaurds behind him. Then he felt a sting in a right butt cheek. He knew those sort of stings were never good, and as the blood ran from his face, he reached back and pulled out a familiar red and black tranquallizer dart. He though of running but his feet wouldn't move. When Kashiro looked down to see what was wrong with his feet, he passed out.

Soon after a man approached, dressed in a red and black outfit made of nylon straps, holsters and plastic pads. The patch on his right shoulder said Psycho Hawk, and on the left, District Manager - Rodriguez.

Rodriguez quickly rolled Kashiro into a red and black body bag, and carefully strapped him to a hand truck. He readjusted the straps to make sure Kashiro could still breath, and then started off on his winding journey to the glass and steel spire in the distance. He had a dispatch that said this debt was to be delivered to the Recieving Dept. at Genetiflux's offices in Rand Tower. He knew it wasn't real, and he used it carefully while navigating through the various toll booths and check points along the way. His only trouble was at the front doors to Rand Towers. He knew they wouldn't accept his forged dispatch, and it took him a half hour to get a clean shot with the tranquallizer gun.

Outside the door to GenetiFlux Labs receiving office, Rodriguez checked his watch and then looked back and forth down the hallway. It's empty, as was much of the building this late at night. He took a plastic pack out from one of his pockets, opened it and pulled out a syringe. He checked his watch again, and did some mental calculations before unzipping the body bag and injecting it into Kashiro's arm. He quickly zipped the bag back up, and barged into the office, waving the dispatch around and making a fuss about being late for

another collection. He dumped the body bag on the table and continued making fuss as he left and shut the door behind him. Back in the hall, Rodriguez checked his watch again, and then broke into a jog so he could get out of the tower and off the plaza before any of the guards woke up.

Kashiro snapped awake, feeling the old sensation of stimulants coursing through his veins. He knew he was in a debt collector's bag from the smell of vomit and urine, and was about to wrretch from the stink when he heard two voices.

"Did you know about this?"

"No man. He's in the system, but it says he was supposed to go to central processing."

"Maybe this is for that brain transplant thing they are trying tomorrow."

"They're going to put his brain in another body?"

"No. They are going to scoop his out and put some one else's in."

"Well, better get him processed before he wakes up."

Kashiro laid there silently, waiting. When the bag unzipped, he leapt up, grabbed his sword and brought it down on the head of a short stocky man with a shiny bald head. The sword cracked through the top of his skull and then stopped at his sinuses. With blood dribbling down the sides of his head, the stocky man started stumbling backwards. The other man, a tall lanky man with long scraggly goatee and equally bald head, started shrieking like a hysterical girl. Kashiro fought to maintain his grip on the sword and tried to wrench it from the man's skull. As the stocky man finally collapsed to the ground, Kashiro was pulled down on top of him, to the sound of a "ping" from the sword breaking in half.

Kashiro got back up, put his foot on the stocky man's jaw, and wiggled the now stubby sword free. He walked over

to the lanky man who was crumpled up in the corner, still shrieking. Kashiro drove the jagged end of his sword into the lanky man's left eye and violently shook it, finally silencing the shrieking.

As he wiped his sword off on the lanky man's coat, he noticed a poster above him. It said, "GenetiFlux Labs, Rand Tower Recieving Dept, processing procedures...". Kashiro paused and thought, "still double lucky". He was in Rand Tower, and from the feeling of high octane euphoria racing through him, he still managed to pick up some meth on the way.

Kashiro slowly opened the door to the hallway and carefully surveyed it. It was empty. He went down the hall till he came to an elevator, and pushed the botton to summon it, but nothing happened. The button and the display next to it never lit up. He continued down the hall till he came to a door marked "service elevator".

Inside was a long stairwell, and down the middle of it was a set of cables. As he jogged up the stairs he passed a couple GenetiFlux debtors, in their coveralls and buzz cuts and carrying cleaning supplies, but they pretended Kashiro wasn't there. At the floor that Carl had told him his target would be on, Kashiro went through the door into another hallway. At the third door, he saw a small sign that read "Marcus Friedman, Chairman of the Board". Still clutching his broken katana, Kashiro opened the door and stepped in.

Kashiro stood in an well furnished office with a 20 foot high ceiling. At the opposite end, the wall was two rows of large window panes in brushed aluminum frames. On the walls to the sides were paintings, group photos and book cases filled with books. In front of the wall of glass, there was a large wooden desk and large golden chair with a leather back. Next to it, illuminated by a single spotlight on the ceiling, was a

waist high pedestal with a glass case. In the glass case with a yellowed spiral bound note book, opened and propped up. Kashiro's eyes zoomed in and focused as he tried to read the faded hand writing. He got as far as, "...through the perfect equilibrium of the markets, a new man will be shaped. In him, the pure knowledge of...", and then Kashiro heard a "click". His eyes zoomed out, and then kept zooming out to an ultra-wide angle that he didn't know they were capable of.

A part of the wall to his right hinged open and a man stepped out while adjusting his pants. He froze at the sight of Kashiro, reached in the unbuttoned top half of his shirt and said, "In the interests of price discovery I should tell you something." He pulled the left side of his shirt and Kashiro saw a small black box embedded in his chest, with one solid green light and another pulsing red. "If my heart stops, 2000 kilos of high explosive will go off 10 floors below us. The price you would pay for killing me would be your own life." He said with a chuckle, as he had been waiting several years for an opportunity to use that line. Kashiro dropped his broken sword and then remained motionless.

"I had heard you might be nuts enough to come and kill our staff over your debt, and might even be smart enough to find me." Marcus said while buttoning up his shirt and walking over to his desk. "But killing them wouldn't have paid your debt, and killing me will cost you your life."

"I've not come for my debt," Kashiro said stoically, "but to save the world from your plans."

"Do you even know our plans?" Marcus said with a bit of disgust.

"To destroy humanity." Kashiro said.

Marcus chuckled again. "You fool. We are here to elevate humanity. To bring it to its next stage in evolution. We call it Homo Economicus." He paused for moment and then stepped over to the glass case. "How about I tell you a story.

Many years ago, we discovered a set of notes hidden deep in a vault in the New York Federal Reserve building written by one of the true disciples of Rand. A man who had actually studied at the feet of the master. He hid these notes because he knew the world was not ready for them. When we found them, the world still wasn't quite ready, but we developed a three pronged attack to help move it along. The first was GenetiFlux Labs. There we tried to advance humanity through very direct means."

He scowled a bit. "Progress is slow though, as most of the demand is for frivolous things, like your ridiculous face. Second was to create an environment where the forces of the market could be accelerated, and that was Circus Atlantis. We've had a few promising cases, but so far they have all cashed out and left." Marcus scowled again and paused for a long while.

Kashiro interrupted the pause with, "So what is the third prong?"

"Do you really think you are smart enough to understand any of this Kevin?" Marcus said with a smirk.

"My name is Kashiro!"

"Your name is Kevin MacDonald, and you are a community college drop out from New Jer..."

"My name is KASHIROOOooooo!" Kashiro loudly interrupted as he lunged at Marcus, put both his hands on the old man's chest, and with all his might and momentum, shoved him towards the glass wall.

Marcus slammed into a glass pane, but before the glass could give way, the shoddy workmanship of the framing did, and Marcus fell out of the building in a cascade of glass and brushed aluminum. Kashiro froze as the last bits of aluminum dropped away and held his breath, waiting... and waiting...

Kashiro wondered if this was one of those moments where seconds seem like hours. And then wondered why he still had

enough time to have his previous thought.

Ten stories below, in a windowless room, a large black box on the wall with a green light waited for a signal to cease. As the signal stopped, the light changed to red. It processed it's pre-programmed routines and sent a signal down a cable to a rack full of electronics. From the racks, dozens of relays had pairs of wires that branched out in every direction and wind-ed there way though the building to steel drums marked "Explosive". From the rack could also be heard the faint building crescendo of a charging capacitor, and then silence. The silence was broken by the chorus of snaps from the relays and then, more silence.

The reason for the continued silence was that, several years ago, the manager for the company who installed the explosives had carefully studied the plans. After careful study, he realized the customer wouldn't be in a position to demand a refund should the product malfunction.

Rather then pay for actual explosives, he pocketed the explosives budget and filled the steel drums with garbage and the body of a supervisor who complained that what he was doing was unethical.

Modern Love

By Razorwired

The best place to find work locally was Waifu Lane. Turns out, even when marriage costs you three wraps of copper and only lasts an hour people still tell their wives too much. A can of corn in the right hand or a favor to the right people and you found out who was inflating their shipping numbers to the Business Court, who had outstanding debts, and which ones competitors had collecting on already.

As I passed through the maze of containers and gave the spliced out bouncers a wide berth I noticed that a few of my contacts weren't there anymore. The odd hole in the floor and rips ending in shoddy welding were evidence enough of what happened. That's why you always spring for workers not wacked out on stim.

I rounded the corner and saw what I was looking for. A single wide trailer wedged between a pair of rusted out steel "houses". I nodded to the mass of muscle in the J-pop t-shirt, "Is Karen around?"

The bouncer shifted to block more of the door, "Could be. She expecting you?"

I sighed and reached into my pocket. I waved my member's card in his face and shoved past him. I hate bouncers. They never know how to treat customers or their valuable currency.

The inside of the trailer was as plush as I remembered it. A small affair featuring a pair of padded chairs and a very cushy bed that never needed its sheets cleaned. In a city where rape, mutilation and sex could be bought daily Karen was a bit of an oddity. She had told me once that she was a grad student

or something on the mainland, came to Libertopia to dodge her student loans. Being the only Japanese girl in the district and having knowledge of mother issues and entitled complexes came in handy. On 57000 Waifu Lane Karen was making more money not fucking manchildren than half her clientele could scrape together in a fiscal quarter.

“Ohayou gozaimasu!” a voice yelled out of the bathroom as a blue haired vision in a schoolgirl outfit stepped into the main room, “Oh... it’s you.” Karen sighed as she plopped into one of the chairs.

“Love you, too.” I said as I sat opposite her, “Any of Haruko’s boyfriends hear something juicy lately?”

Karen pulled a set of crooked false teeth out of her mouth, “Could have. You got any cash?”

I pulled the spool of copper out of my pocket and rolled out three arm lengths, “Well that’s as much as you’d get for listening to some greasy kid talking about his sword mastery for an hour. What do you got?”

She rolled up the wire and dumped it in a drawer, “Well I haven’t heard of any loose debtors lately but since you’re such a good boy I guess there’s no harm in telling.” She smiled at me, “Tsubaki Industries has let its security contract with VilCo lapse. They’ve got no guards and a shipment coming in tonight. Canned meat, fruit, I even hear they have a crate of Cheetos somewhere on the ship. Now wouldn’t it be terrible if some of that very valuable cargo were to be misfiled or lost?”

Now that was interesting. On the one hand stealing was something for the parasites. On the other if it was on a free dock with no security I couldn’t be held responsible if I found something and took it to the safety of my own home,

“Which dock are they at?”

“Number one.”

“Don’t try to fuck me. Which number one?”

Karen stood up and bent over my seat, "Oh you don't pay that well. And you get to know specifics if you promise me one thing."

"I'm not bouncing for you." Karen played a pretty good game, but sometimes her clients could get a little insistent, and I didn't relish the thought of dumping bodies in the nearest hole.

"Scrawny thing like you? Please. There's another item on the manifest. I want two packs of it."

"What should I be looking for?"

She whispered one word, "Charmin."

Still Humping The American Dream

By Lars Blitzer

“Pssst, do you have stairs?”
The question froze me in my tracks, the man asking it, lingering over the tepid seaweed tea he had just dropped off at my table kept his face immobile. Shifting my weight to the balls of my feet, feeling the trickle of fight-or-sweat work its way down my spine, I take a deep breath.

“I am protected.”

A slight nod, a grubby rag wiped over the unoccupied half of the cheap MDF card table, and he was gone. With a wary eye on my fellow diners I swept up the scrap of paper the waiter left behind and turned the motion into scooping up my plastic tumbler of tea.

When the waiter didn't come out for a couple of minutes I stood up, laid down a sheaf of CJD scrip where the twitchy security guard could see it, and made my way to the door. I ran through my list as I walked out: Need power, got to talk to Scrapheap about pedalling tonight for a while. Need food, heard something about a haul of fish by some brave souls who made it out past the Scab. Still got three ramen packs, peace be upon His Noodley Majesty. Ammo? Got a dozen or so 12 ga. double ought, 9 mil will last as well; it has to. Made my contribution to the local Bully Boys...

The smell and humidity hit me when I stepped outside; the container's heat was oppressive, but at least there were at least three or four C Cans layered on top of it. Immediately my senses were overwhelmed for a few seconds. Libertalia. Or, at least the slice of Libertalia I allowed myself to experience. Jabbering voices, noxious smells, the merciless heat

and more made for a massive assault, and a dangerous distraction. Even with my eyes dazzled behind my cheap sunglasses my feet knew the way. Some distance away from the “Gud EatZ Grill” I unfolded the scrap I scooped up.

“Is not a Goon entitled to the Hurf of his Durf? C-404-L2” My next contact! Adjusting my bucket hat I shouldered through the crowd, planning my route on the fly. I had taken the lack of explosions or nearby gunfire to be a good sign, so my path was more direct then usual. The place had definitely gone downhill.

Arrived on this floating turd some umptytump years ago, wanting to document the Hindenburg crashing and burning from the inside. I knew it would fail, the writing was on the wall. These modern would-be John Galts deliberately blinded themselves to the cold stark meathook realities of a world that just didn’t care about Randian fantasies. Getting rid of the chaff, the basement dwellers with delusions of adequacy as well as the parade of entitled douches, anyone who had two trust funds to rub together, marching to the tune of “Fuck you, got mine!” Well, I see how it really is. Horatio Alger would weep, then nuke the site from orbi-

I shook my head, trying to dislodge that bit of self-indulgent narration. First rule, there is a man sitting at a computer, typing out everything I do or say. Fourth Wall. Not my fault he’s been cutting his meth with Cheetos and polyurethane sealant. It’s the only way any of this makes any sense. I think I tumbled to this three (or was it four?) years back. Without this conceit I would’ve walked off the side of the Shanties long ago, letting my body get absorbed by the Scab.

I had a story to write though. The word had to get out, even if it just lands onto a random chan site and gets passed around like a bad piece of Copypasta. I couldn’t give a proper date for when everything went pear shaped. Years ago, when there was still gleaming steel for roads, the standard modus

operandi was a wary truce. The event was as galvanizing as getting tazed by a Filipino kid's gang. It must have been when the container ship was cut away to let it sink rather than take the whole rotten Stead, and us, with it, or the "Two out of Three Ain't bad" debacle.

At the time you could read a newspaper at midnight from the LCDTV-dead-channel-blue glow of the hold, before the Welders moved in and covered it in so much scrap metal there's only a 50-50 chance of your testicles spontaneously developing sentience. But now Rand Tower is a skeletal reminder of hubris and shortsightedness, rather than the gleaming knife edge jutting from the ocean.

Now is every man for himself, or at least even moreso than when Idiot Parade marched down these streets. Lost in thought I mumble nonstop, occasionally twitch, flinch and swat away things that aren't there. I know they aren't there, the bastards, but people, even people as desperate as the fine upstanding citizens around these stacks shy away from me. It's a survival mechanism. Despite how rational and educated anyone can be here, there's something instinctual about avoiding the crazies. Like is . Well, it is, but it's a hereditary affliction. I'm lucky I'm perfectly sane.

I find the address, a C Can one story up, stacked on top of another. I spot the tag: A pineapple grenade's in black, the lever to the right. The graffitied swarm of bees wearing army helmets on one of the doors sealed the deal. The waiter was on the level, as it turned out. I get within five feet of the door when I'm challenged "Who's there?"

"A fellow Goon." I answer.

"Who's got your ten bucks?"

"Lowtax. Listen, can you let m-

"No, I have to be certain. What's a P-p-p-p-powerbook?"

My shoulders slumped "A cardboard box with a brick in it, scribbled all over to look like a MacBook and mailed to some

scammer in London or something. Just let me enter, the swine are closing in.”

The door swung open just wide enough to let me in sideways. The guard swung his Brisbane Arms shotgun out of the way to accommodate my skinny frame.

Looking around I spot the few people I actually trust on this trashheap. No online aliases, we just use fictional names as our handles have trails attached. Covering your tracks meant changing almost everything about you. No facial hair, no excess weight, no pale skin. We even swore off junk foods and using textspeak. Anything to prevent any Captain of Industry from getting wind of us. We few were it. Our cabal couldn't afford a slip up.

One man at the far end of the Can stood up from his desktop rig, grey ponytail swept back over his shoulder. “Raoul. Glad you could make it. There's been news.” He made his way through the assorted chairs to the middle of the group.

“The UN's sending a flotilla, this time to dismantle the place.” Looking around he singled out a skinny middle aged woman, swaddled in dun and khaki so as to disguise her curves and disrupt her outline like a Ghilly Suit.

She cleared her throat. “Chatter came over the shortwave this morning, and rumour among the stevedores bears it out. It'll be a matter of days, if not hours before they arrive.”

“So where does that leave us? Do we for one welcome our new collectivist overlords? What about our work?”

The man in the center shook his head “It's over. We've done our job. We say ‘Fuck all y'all.’ and take our GI Joes home.”

“That can't be it! You think that when the coalition troops show up that'll be it, game over?” I was gesticulating now, my wiry arms flapping my vintage Hawaiian shirt like a flag.

“Do you honestly imagine the Powers-That-Be here to roll over and give up without a fight!? Fuck no, thank you kindly!” Flecks of foam were gathering at the corners of my mouth,

my cigarette holder quivering.

“This is when the real journalism starts, damn you! We have to light the way, to document this shitstorm, to be native guides! The revolution may not be televised, but by the Unholy Slenderman it will be blogged!” With that I turned on my heel and made for the door.

Oh, To Live In Such Times

By Viscardus

It was not until we were within a day of reaching Atlantis that Adam Jedynak finally spoke to me. Frederic gave me assurances that it would only be a matter of time, that Adam was a private person and would take some time to warm up to strangers, but his words were little comfort.

I had agreed to join this incredibly dangerous – foolish, I would have said at the time – endeavour in large part because I was promised access to the reclusive Jedynak, and the few days we had before we reached our destination were, as far as I knew then, my best opportunity to gain insight into the mind of this mysterious figure.

I didn't even see him approach, busy as I was staring out over the water, wondering when I'd catch the first glimpse of the visual monstrosity that was Atlantis. I had seen photographs, of course, but I have to admit I felt a sort of perverse excitement at the thought of seeing it in person. Now, of course, I only wish I could erase it from my mind, as I'm sure Adam did even then.

"Can you smell it yet?" he asked without warning, suddenly standing to my left.

I was momentarily without words, surprised as I was by his sudden appearance, initiating a conversation out in the open after I'd spent days trying to convince Frederic to give me access to his cabin. "Smell what?" I replied dumbly.

"Freedom," he said solemnly, then laughed. "The stench of absolute freedom, or what passes for it, anyway. We should be able to smell Atlantis soon."

I felt like an idiot. The Atlantic Dead Zone was one of the

biggest environmental topics at the time, and even today its damage has not been fully reversed. The smell of the vast patch of garbage and pollutants spreading out into the ocean from Atlantis was said to travel for miles across the open ocean, though I had of course never experienced it myself.

"I don't think I can yet." I answered. "Should I be able to?"

Adam chuckled. It lessened the intimidating effect of his hard, scarred face. "If you're not sure, then you haven't yet. You'll know when you do, trust me." He scanned the horizon, but the infamous shape of Liberty Tower was nowhere to be seen.

"You'll probably know before me, in fact. A few years of that place tends to burn out your nose a little, and that's not even taking into account the chemical fumes."

I said nothing, unsure of how to respond. Embarrassingly, I found myself struggling to think of something to say, the questions I'd been planning to ask him since boarding the ship suddenly falling out of my mind.

"You wanted to talk to me, didn't you?" he said after I failed to speak. "Now's your chance."

"Oh, yes, well... I guess I was wondering if we could discuss what's going to happen once we reach Atlantis," I said, stumbling over the words.

"No you weren't," he replied bluntly. "I know Morozov must have briefed you by now, and Frederic could have answered any other questions you had. You want to talk to me because I'm the only one here who has actually been to Atlantis. Who's lived there." I'm sure my reaction confirmed the truth of his speculation. He chuckled again. "You want stories, don't you, kid?"

"Yeah," I admitted, "I guess I do."

"Everybody wants stories," he sighed. "You're going to see it yourself within 24 hours and you still want stories."

He shrugged. "All right, anything in particular you're in the

mood for? You want to hear about the slave trade? About the drugs and the medical experimentation? About the protection rackets that call themselves police and fire departments?”

I was slightly taken aback at this point, and increasingly feeling like I'd completely lost control of the situation. “I guess... I just want to get an idea of what I need to be prepared for. I've read plenty about Atlantis, but I still feel like I don't really... understand how a place like that can really exist.”

He looked at me solemnly. “You can't be prepared. Not for that place, it's just not possible.” There was something in his voice as he said that, some mix of sadness and revulsion, perhaps. “If you want to know how it can exist, though, I'll tell you.”

Adam paused for a moment, looking back over the water. After a few seconds, I began to wonder if he'd changed his mind or gotten lost in his own thoughts. Then he spoke.

“It's not about the flaws of the philosophy, or the madness of the idea. Those are reasons it didn't work, reasons it couldn't work, but that doesn't explain why people tried. It doesn't explain why people keep trying, why half the people on that floating trash heap still haven't realized how broken their dream really is.

“The reason for that is different. It's about the people there, about what they're like. They don't realize their dreams are broken because they're broken. And it's not something that happened on Atlantis, either. Atlantis has broken the spirits of many, that's true, but that's not what I mean.

“I went to Atlantis on one of the first waves of settlement. I was a stupid kid with a large inheritance, a good education, and enough arrogance and entitlement for ten men. In short, I was a fool, and in that I wasn't unlike most of the people on that godforsaken boat.

“There are two people who I remember meeting on the voy-

age there. They weren't the only ones I spoke to, of course, but they're the ones I remember so clearly, even to this day.

The first was a middle-aged man, thin, dark-haired, wearing a tailored suit. He looked like the epitome of a respectable businessman. I remember being surprised when he approached me out of the blue, explaining that he'd done some research on me and was quite impressed with the work I'd done in university. He had plans, he explained to me, and mechanical engineers were among those he needed. He believed he could create an energy monopoly, that it had the highest potential for profit of any area of the fledgling Atlantean economy and that it would be easy to protect once assembled. He was quite frank about the tactics he intended to use to acquire this monopoly – tactics that would have been illegal anywhere else in the world. No doubt he meant to convey bluntly that he was the winning side and that I should join up immediately.

"I was uncomfortable with what he was saying, though. I tried not to show it, but the sort of things he was talking about did not seem to me to be at all the point of a free market. Strong-arming competitors and deceiving consumers did nothing but hinder fair competition, as I saw it. I found out later that this was a highly idealistic view by the standards of those who would become the Atlantean elite. As it was, I thanked him for the opportunity and told him I'd have to think about it.

"The other person I spoke to was this kid... well, I say 'kid', but he was no younger than I was at the time. His appearance and demeanor gave the impression of someone in their teens, not their twenties, though.

Nonetheless, I found myself speaking to him, having a surprisingly engaging conversation. The topic had drifted toward powered exoskeletons and other such fantastic technology. It was an interest of mine, albeit one that I never imagined re-

alistically putting any effort toward. And yet he was insisting that the technology had progressed further than anyone realized, and that it was simply being kept hidden by the American government.

“Leaning in conspiratorially, he whispered that he had blueprints for something even more advanced – a complete robotic body that a human subject could be placed into. I was sceptical, of course, and yet intrigued all the same. When I asked him if could show me his plans, he silently nodded, removed a folded sheet of paper from his ratty backpack, and handed it to me.

“I didn’t expect much, perhaps a plausible-looking facsimile of what the man I was talking to described them as. And yet even that would have given him far too much credit. What I saw was a hand-drawn, vaguely pornographic sketch of an anthropomorphic dragon. For a moment I assumed that this had all been some juvenile practical joke, and that he’d burst out laughing at any moment. But when I looked into his eyes, I saw nothing but earnestness.

“For a moment, I just stared at him, and then I silently handed back the sketch and walked away,” Adam finished, still staring out at the sea.

I waited a few moments, not sure whether the story was over or what to make of any of it. “Is that it?” I finally asked.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Adam said gruffly, as if he’d upset himself by telling the story. “Don’t you get it? Those are the two types of people who went to Atlantis. Some are sociopaths and some are just delusional – many are caught somewhere between the two – but they’re all broken. They don’t look at it and see what we see. Most of them don’t even realise what a hell they live in, and the rest don’t care. That’s how a place like Atlantis can exist.”

I thought about this for a moment. It was a straightforward idea, but it seemed simplistic to me. To this day I’m not sure

whether I agree with Adam's analysis, but it was what he believed, and who could blame him, considering the time he spent in that hellish place?

A thought occurred to me as I went over the story again. "The businessman you mentioned. That was Leland Curtis, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he replied. "I decided I'd rather get into bed with a sociopath than a lunatic." The regret in his voice was obvious.

"And the other man, what happened to him?"

Adam looked out over the water for a long while before he spoke. "I only saw him once more, several years later. He never gave up on his ridiculous dream, for whatever it's worth. He'd volunteered for a medical experiment and..." he trailed off.

"Well, he's dead now. It's probably best if I don't give you the details."

The Offered Branch

By Daktar

You can tell when you're getting close to Libertalia. For miles around the sea is polluted, covered in an oily sheen and treacherous with floating debris. It begins just as you see Rand Tower emerging from behind the horizon. Rand Tower is the centrepiece of Libertalia (though due to the expansion of the island over the years, it's now closer to the western 'shore') and it is not a welcoming sight. Once occupied by the rich and powerful founders of the island, it's now a crumbling glass and titanium ruin, the windows shattered by powerful pacific storms or occasionally, gunfire.

The boat I'm on is crewed by members of a UN Diplomatic/Relief Unit. Their purpose is primarily humanitarian, to bring food and medicine to the people who need it most. The olive branch, however, hides a dagger. Attached to the unit are some of the UN's most experienced negotiators. Their mission is to negotiate with the *de facto* leaders of rogue, unrecognised 'free' states like Libertalia, arranging for them to be brought under the aegis of a recognised government and usually, dismantled or decolonised. I asked one of the negotiators, Remy Durand, for his thoughts about his task.

Durand: It all began with the technology, I think. Hydroponics, naval engineering, it all got cheaper and cheaper until say, a multi-millionaire could afford a small artificial island without bankrupting themselves. Get a few of them together and they can build something like Libertalia. Combine that with the Little Depression and suddenly you've got a lot of angry nouveaux riches thinking they can do better than their

government causing these things to bloom like mushrooms all over the oceans.

Me: What's the real danger in places like Libertalia?

D: Aside from the moral danger? I say that because we've been doing so much better on land these past couple of decades, with regards to poverty, famine, lawlessness, things like that. You look at Somalia these days and compare it to how it was at the beginning of the millennium. And then these rich idiots set up these uhh...attractive nuisances, and suddenly we have a whole new class of problems that we really don't have much experience in dealing with, and thousands of people who need our help who shouldn't.

But like I say, aside from that, you have the usual. These places are refuges for terrorists, international criminals, pirates. They're environmental hazards. I don't need to explain that, just look at the sea around us. And they're plague pits. Seven new highly infectious strains of influenza have come out of free states in the past ten years, and three antibiotic-resistant bacterial diseases from some of the more prosperous ones that can afford or manufacture antibiotics but don't have any restrictions on their use.

Me: Your assignment is to make contact with local leaders and convince them to allow a government to take control of Libertalia, with a view to dismantling it over time. Is de-constructing them always the long term goal?

D: In most cases yes. It doesn't matter how good the technology is, when you build a floating island you need to know exactly what you're doing and what other people are doing with it. Take the Dutch neo-polders for example, they work fine, you've got towns, roads, even airports. And you've got

to go through reams and reams of regulations before you can build so much as a garden shed on one. That's the only way it can work. The people who set Libertalia up, they wanted no regulation at all. And the result, well, you'll see when we get there.

Me: Could you give me a quick overview of the process of dismantling Libertalia, starting with your negotiations?

D: Oui. We'll arrive, very shortly in fact. The aid teams will dispense food and medical assistance. I am to make contact with a Lucille Rockefeller, who is a local 'captain of industry' as they call them on Libertalia. By which I mean she is a gang boss who controls a number of drugs labs. With people like these it is tempting to go the easy route and just offer a massive personal reward for co-operation, but that would only encourage others. So we go for a smaller reward and thinly veiled threats for non-cooperation. One of the incentives we offer is the promise that the adopting country's laws will not apply retrospectively, so she gets away with her drug trafficking and other crimes. The threat is that if we have to eventually take the island by force, she will be charged for past crimes. Provided that she survives such an assault, of course.

Okay, so that's me. I convince her to allow an adopting nation's forces occupy the island, she convinces her followers and maybe a couple of her fellow leaders. Meanwhile my colleagues do the same for the others. Once we have enough prospective control, the adopting nation's forces, or perhaps an international coalition supporting the nation, they move in. Usually army, navy and a few Interpol agents to apprehend wanted fugitives. The armed forces are especially important in this case, Libertalia has a strong pirate contingent operating out of what is practically a fortress on the eastern shore, and they will not go quietly, believe me.

So assuming we've convinced the leaders and safely dealt with rogue elements, the next step is the people. Do you know much about the demographics of the place?

Me: Apart from the original colonists, no.

D: Well let's start with them, yes? Forgive me for asking the questions again, but have you read any Ayn Rand? They named the tower after her.

Me: I skimmed them for this assignment. I understand the original colonists were heavily influenced by her ideas.

D: Yes. I wouldn't read any deeper than you did. You really are not missing anything. But the people who colonised, they read her books, and they believed every word. They were mostly soft, middle class, white Americans and Europeans, as you said you know, and a lot of them died or got out when things got bad. But the ones that survived, well they're uhh... hardcore. Yes, that's the only way to put it. In a way, they got exactly what they wanted. No government. I would say no gods, no masters, but a lot of them are actually religious, and they certainly do what their bosses say. But they are tough. They occupy the centre, the original island, and I think they still believe in Libertalia. Some of them have been there since the beginning, thirty or so years, and if it weren't for the fact we could lean on their leaders there'd be no dealing with them. Not even the pirates mess with them.

Ah, speaking of the pirates. Somalis mostly, ones who don't actually believe the country's getting better or ones who can't go back now that the place has a functioning government for fear of punishment. Aside from them, there's criminals from all over the world, and they mostly get along and even work together on raids. Quite a successful multi-cultural grouping,

really.

Then we have the outskirts. Again, people from all over the world, the most desperate, downtrodden, poverty stricken. Usually oppressed by someone or another. They aren't educated, they hear about this place where you make your own rules and live free. They hear you can make your own land if you have some scrap metal and a welder. So they get a boat, they get the metal, the welder, someone who knows how to weld, and in these leaky little tubs they sail out to where they think Libertalia might be. Many sink, or they navigate completely incorrectly and starve to death on the open seas. But some find the place, and they sail up and bolt their sheets of corrugated iron onto the shore as best they can. The boat gets turned into a house and then they have to figure out how to survive. They're the ones we need to help, and they're the reason Libertalia has been growing outward.

Me: This is fascinating, but you were talking about the process of dismantling it.

D: Ah yes, je suis désolé. Demography is a particular interest of mine. Anyway, the people. They will be offered asylum in one of the nations contributing to our mission, starting from the shore and working in. We do this because as soon as we move someone out, we cut away the bit they were living on so no one else can move in in their place. And so we make the island smaller and smaller from the edges until hopefully there's nothing left but the anchoring structure in the middle, and that's below the water. And so an ill thought out vanity project that caused far more trouble than was ever anticipated is brought to an end.

We were getting very close to Libertalia. I had been absorbed in listening to Durand, and hadn't noticed a metal shoreline

rushing towards us. The smell of rust, oil and dead fish filled the air. Durand was clearly going to be needed soon, so I concluded the interview.

Me: Monsieur Durand, thank you for your time.

D: Not at all. Avec plaisir.

He stood up, and a soldier dressed in the UN Peacekeeper's uniform handed him a rifle. Durand took the L85A9 with an ease that suggested he'd been rigorously trained for it. I myself had received basic firearms training as a requirement for me to be allowed to observe this mission. I soon learned why. The soldier who'd given Durand the rifle passed me a surplus Beretta pistol that looked like it had seen much better days. I refused it at first, but apparently I wouldn't be allowed to leave the boat if I didn't take it. On Libertalia, a weapon was essential. Reluctantly, I accepted it. It didn't feel at all comfortable hanging in its holster.

The boat pulled up alongside a dock of sorts. It was a set of rotting wooden pallets with rusting iron poles driven deep into them. A tanned, weather-beaten Vietnamese man was there to greet us. He was a harbour-master, one of the latest iterations. Harbour-masters could only make money from their harbours for so long before new immigrants landlocked the port. Some masters would fight, and usually be killed by refugees more desperate for survival than they. Others merely accepted it and occasionally helped the new arrivals set up, recognising the situation as the natural way of things and wishing to help out people whose situation they had once been in. A very un-Objectivist display of self-sacrificing altruism and fellow feeling.

This particular harbour-master was paid in blank gold coins. After the collapse of the crypto-currency Libertalia had origi-

nally relied upon, gold was accepted as the next best thing, and continued to be used even after Libertarian society descended into total chaos. The harbour-master weighed the coins and, seemingly satisfied, helped to tie up the boat and slot the boarding ramp into place.

I followed the soldiers, aid workers and diplomats off the boat and took my first step onto the shores of a libertarian paradise. My foot went through one of the planks and my shoe filled with scummy, polluted water.

After shaking the water from my boot and enduring the general amusement of the crew, I take my first real look at Libertalia. It is an uninspiring sight. Masses of rust-stained iron, stacks of driftwood and mutilated boat-hulls serving as shacks dominate the view. One would expect circling, predatory seabirds to complete the general atmosphere, but in truth Libertalia is far too famine-stricken to attract even the most desperate gull. The waters surrounding the island are hopelessly overfished.

When everyone is off the boat, aside from the soldiers assigned to guard it, the team leaps into action. The aid teams fan out towards the places they are needed most. They head for makeshift clinics and begin dishing out protein and fibre bars to the homes they pass by. Their supplies are heavily guarded. There are few Libertarians who would pass up the opportunity to take such bounty for themselves, either for personal use or for trade.

The diplomats likewise head off on their missions. Some of them move off into the rusty favela surrounding us, ready to meet with the leaders of immigrant communities, while others like Durand are to go to the centre to meet 'indigenous' Libertarians such as Lucille Rockefeller. Each diplomat has an aide and two guards. I walk with Durand, and as we navigate the twisted labyrinth of shanties, he explains to me the necessity of the soldiers and our weapons.

Durand: You've noticed how people are looking at us, yes?

I look around. Some of the inhabitants are angry, as though we're intruding. Some are merely curious. Others...

Me: They look like they're sizing us up.

D: Mmmhmm. You were told not to bring anything valuable, of course, and we haven't, except maybe our guns. But we ourselves are valuable. Some of these people are slavers, and they would take us if they thought they could easily get away with it.

His revelation comes as no great surprise to me. Libertia is well known as having taken up the vice of slavery relatively early. Back when it was a mostly-functioning society, it was known as a 'transferable contract'. A person could enter themselves into one for a set time in return for a lump payment, or be required to enter into one if they became too greatly indebted. At first the terms were relatively reasonable (although highly exploitative, particularly in the case of debtors), but as the situation on Libertia worsened, the duties a contractee could expect to owe their contract holder became increasingly onerous. When the economy of the island began to collapse, labour slavery fell out of favour and sex slavery, also already prevalent, became the norm. Today there are no contracts, but the trade in slaves continues. Women, Durand informs me, are in particular danger.

As we pass through the outer ring of the slums, the shacks surrounding us thin out and we step onto ground that is less rusted and more consistent than the flotsam we've been walking on. These are the 'suburbs', platforms that were bolted to the central island when the original Libertarians realised

they needed more space. Some of them even have their own anchoring towers.

Although the ramshackle huts of the slums are a given, it is surprising to see so many collapsed buildings on this ostensibly well-maintained structure. Although, based on what Durand told me and my own knowledge, perhaps it is not so unexpected. The founders of Libertalia scorned building codes, seeing them as yet another example of excessive government interference in their lives. As such, the newer structures were erected as quickly and cheaply as possible, with predictable results. The ones that still stand are occupied by immigrants, the 'natives' having retreated much further into the centre.

After a few more minutes of walking, we ourselves step over the welding seam that marks the boundary between a suburb and the original Libertalia. We step into a road that seems extravagantly wide for a place where real estate is at a premium, although I notice the buildings cluster thickly on either side. This is Galt Boulevard, running south to join the circular road surrounding Rand Tower, which looms ahead of us. Galt's counterparts are Smith, Reagan and Hazlitt, running east, north and west respectively. It seems strange to me that the only fictional character in that list should be given pride of place in this cardinal arrangement.

As we proceed along Galt Boulevard, diplomats and their guards peel away from our group, going to meet their assigned captains of industry. Durand is to meet Rockefeller in Rand Tower itself, and so I depart before he does. He wishes me good luck, and I the same to him.

The UN wishes to keep the details of the meetings with the Libertalian leaders as secret as possible, particularly from the Libertalians themselves. It is feared that they will cause problems if they catch wind that a government is coming to evict them. Not to mention the troubles that could occur if the pirates realised what was about to happen. The aid por-

tion of this mission is as much a smokescreen as it is an act of mercy. And so I am assigned a guard of my own, a stern Ukrainian named Vasyl Pavlychko, whose job is partially to protect me but mostly to keep me from blabbing to anyone I should meet.

The person I am visiting is not a captain of industry. He is, in local parlance, an 'entrepreneur', an individual who is able to produce something of value and has a small, defensible territory, but no real followers. His name is Mark Algood, and he moved from the USA to Libertalia shortly after its founding.

In addition to being my minder, Pavlychko is also my guide, and he leads me along the almost deserted streets of central Libertalia. It is easy to tell which house is Algood's, barricades surround it and the windows are covered by metal grilles. The front door, however, is opened invitingly, although it is flanked menacingly by what look like guns. As we approach we see that they are in fact rather antiquated M16s, mounted on a complex assembly of rods, levers and servos. I practically jump out of my skin when one of them turns to point at me and speaks. "Helloooo," it says in a sing-song, childlike tone. At which point Algood makes his entrance, stepping out of his house and greeting us with a "Hah, scared you huh?" He seems reluctant to shake hands, and briefly looks confused when I hold mine out before limply pressing his palm against mine. The formalities over, he invites us in, staring at Pavlychko with some suspicion.

Algood shows us around his house before we begin the interview. A generator in his fortified garden provides the house with electricity, while what was once a large lawn is now given over to a rather straggly looking selection of food crops. The plants growing in the hydroponic units upstairs are healthier, but the improvised still sitting in the corner of the grow room betrays their eventual purpose. Algood's main 'export' is fuel alcohol, with which he powers his generator

and trades with fellow entrepreneurs.

Algood shows me downstairs once again, and into what he calls his den. The room is, in a word, filthy. Dust clings to every surface and the floor is carpeted in empty plastic bottles and crisp packets. I recognise a Doritos pack the design of which was discontinued ten years ago, around the time when all trade with Libertalia stopped. Algood shows me his entertainment centre, consisting of a stack of obsolete games' consoles and a television with a cracked, bleached casing. He points out his computer, of which he seems inordinately proud. I had to struggle not to smirk. It was a set of dusty green circuit boards piled up in a set of wire racks mounted on the wall. I have no doubt that my phone (safely stowed back aboard the boat) is at least three times as powerful as this mass of antiquated silicon. Algood invites me to sit down on a sagging sofa, while he takes an obviously well-used easy chair. Our interview begins with a question from him.

Algood: Could your guy go stand outside? He's making me nervous.

I look at Pavlychko. He nods and steps out of the room, although I know he's standing where he can hear our conversation.

A: That's better. Fuckin' UN man, government of governments, you know what I mean? US was way better when they just did what needed to be done. That's kinda why I moved out here.

Me: When did you move here?

A: About 30 years ago. I was 23 then.

That would make him around 53. He looks about the right age, although he speaks in a soft, nasally tone that makes him sound much younger.

Me: What were the circumstances?

A: Well, I followed the development of Libertalia pretty closely. We had this revolutionary new form of currency, CryptCoin it was called. It was based on the success of honest businessmen and not just what some anonymous government banker said. And to improve competition they opened the cryptographic mining program to people all over the world. So I tapped my mom for some cash, bought a load of graphics cards and networked them together. I'm kind of a big deal when it comes to computers. You see those turrets outside? Rigged 'em up myself with a couple of Arduino boards. Good for keeping the parasites away. Anyway, the graphics cards were the best way to mine the currency. I made pretty good bank, and I thought, hey, why don't I move out where I can spend it easily?

Me: I see. So you were able to move here purely on the proceeds of the CryptCoins you mined?

A: Yeah. Well, my mom made up some of the difference, but I pretty much pulled myself up by the bootstraps. The cryptocurrency collapsed after a while, but by then I had a pretty good stash of Purestrain.

Me: Purestrain?

A: Pure-strain gold. It's the gold that was formed in the first stars after the Big Bang. It's provable with quantum physics. Gives it an intrinsic value. So yeah, I actually did pretty good

after the collapse of the currency. Was able to get this place and a bunch of my stuff for a song after a load of splitters left.

Me: I presume you bought the hydroponics equipment around the same time. You taught yourself how to grow food and make fuel alcohol. Were you preparing for the collapse of Libertarian society?

A: I want to be very clear about this. Libertarian society has NOT collapsed. Sure, some parasites have moved in, but the core, the core of Libertalia survives. We're a society of rugged individuals; we band together to defend our property against looters and parasites, but otherwise we leave each other alone.

I have to wonder whether Algood's independence is more due to the fact that his meagre holdings are simply not worth the trouble of overcoming his barricades and turrets.

Me: Is there anything you miss at all about your life before you came to Libertalia?

A: The internet I guess. Though we had that here too for a while. External parasites cut us off. They were jealous of our success, and they had to censor our communications so their best and brightest wouldn't go Galt on them.

In actuality, the trunk connecting Libertalia to the internet decayed after years of no maintenance. Satellite connections were similarly disrupted when the subscriptions lapsed.

Me: You say you're a society of individuals. Do you have any sort of companionship in your life?

A: Had this little Phillipino bitch a few years back. She was pretty nice.

I had to fight back a wave of nausea. Did Algood really mean what I thought he did?

Me: You mean she was a slave?

A: There are no slaves on Libertalia. I fairly purchased her transferable contract for personal services. Sadly she died of something before it reached its expiry date.

A note of regret in his voice? If there is, it's the regret one feels for the loss of a prized possession, not a loved one.

A: So yeah, I've been saving up the cash I make selling fuel for a new one. The pirates are parasites, but they can arrange contracts given the right incentives. Be nice to have a female in the house again.

I've heard quite enough. I quickly conclude the interview.

Me: Mr. Algood, thank you for your time.

A: No problem, man. Hopefully this'll get the true story of Libertalia out there.

Of that I have no doubt. Algood shows me and Pavlychko to the door. As we walk away, I feel his turrets tracking my movements. One of them says "Are you still there?" Despite the tumbled buildings and increasing numbers of armed denizens, I feel much safer when we cross back over the weld seam into one of the suburbs.

The Other End Of The Rainbow

By Big Poppa Creamy

The pollution from Libertalia stretches out for miles, but once you get within 1 or 2 miles, you hit what Oceanographers have started calling The Big Clot. After a few years of all the biological waste, fuel waste, trash and what the hell else they were tipping over the side, it all started to, well, congeal. Garbage tangled together as it was pitched over into the side and began to rot and fuse, forming a kind of skin over the surface of the water. Weird industrial waste melted and hardened and after a while it got to the point where you could almost walk on it where it's closest to the platform itself.

Some smartass called it a clot forming over a wound on the planet's surface and, well, it stuck. Our ships are modified ice-breakers, meant to cut through the clot and begin to break it up. Once we start successfully breaking down Libertalia, then cleanup crews will move in to try and staunch the worst of the environmental damage.

We just hit the clot half an hour back. The boat shuddered slightly but it was no match for the reinforced hull and powerful engines. The higher-ups were concerned about releasing toxic vapours once we broke the skin of the clot, so anybody spending more than 10 minutes above-decks now is issued with a filter mask. Even with the mask on, I swore I could smell it when we broke through, an oily, metallic tang that stuck at the back of my throat. I rushed back inside to vomit.

Unlike most of the others here on the UN Diplomatic/Relief unit, I'm not especially concerned with the people living on Libertalia, I'm here for the ones who died. I'm a historian of sorts, but I'm the only historian you'll see wearing a kevlar

vest with a 9 mm semiautomatic slung from my hip. As the rest of the team starts bringing people in and removing sections of the island, I'll be conducting interviews and combing through homes and ships for old journals, reports, paperwork, and kind of cultural artifacts I can find to start trying to piece together what happened.

You see, once the Seasteads got up and running, nobody really gave much thought as to how they'd maintain contact with the outside world. Internet, phone-lines, any kind of modern communications technology required massive infrastructure work to get running and maintain, and everyone who moved over there just about figured that eventually someone else would be the one to lay a fibre-optic cable along the seabed to the island. Sooner or later, just about all the Seasteads ended up going dark. No word to the mainland, no messages, no idea what's going on.

Here's what we know, about six months after the first major Seasteads started going up, most of them went through something called 'The Great Market Re-Adjustment'. The little snippets of information we got back spoke of people outside the scope of the original Seastead moving in. Fugitive pirates from Somalia, High-profile criminals trying to escape the law, regular folks who'd just heard the stories about pitching up with a boat and some sheet metal and finding your fortune.

This didn't settle so well with a lot of the original founders and led to, at best, a kind of tense détente and at worst, civil war. Surprisingly, our most substantial historical artifact from that period is a work of fiction. About a year afterwards, a publishing house called Hands of Atlas Publishing released a book called *The Last Anthem*. The book details the story of an original inhabitant of the Libertalia Seastead and his last days aboard the island. However, the book was published under a pseudonym and upon investigation of Hands

of Atlas Publishing, everyone involved just seemed to have vanished off the grid entirely. The book became an instant cult hit, with a limited print run but endlessly shared online, but still with no idea as to the book's veracity, which is one of the main reasons for my presence on this mission.

Excerpt from The Last Anthem:

My hand rested uneasily on the butt of the pistol I'd looted from my neighbour's corpse as I looked around at the small group of people I'd been forced to share shelter with. Out foraging, we'd all come under fire from a roaming 'Nist gang and had all dived into the shelter of the most solid-looking building in the subdivision. These people were all unknown to me, I hadn't even brokered non-violence contracts with any of them so things could erupt at any second. Mike was a true believer. You could tell from the slightly desperate look in his eye and the way he called us all 'Fellow Captains of Industry' as he rose unsteadily to his feet to address us.

"Good firm men of purpose, I believe we can turn this situation to our advantage. Though we may be held in the grip of the leeches and the whiners at this moment, there is, amongst us, the chance to form a mutually-beneficial partnership, should you all decide to become my subordinates in a matter of great importance."

He was trying way too hard to sound older and more important than the 22, 23-ish years he looked. Weak jaw with the beginnings of a ginger neckbeard quivering slightly as he looked at us expectantly. The replica Frostmourne strapped

over his back looked like the cocktail stick jammed into a wiener on a buffet table. As expected, at the mention of working for him, a cry went up around the room until a burst of gunfire from outside silenced it quickly. Nobody wanted the 'Nists to know we were still here. Mike took the opportunity to stand back up and quickly press his case.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! I understand your reticence to place yourself under the yoke of another, but know this! You will be working in gainful employment towards a most worthy cause. I have it on good authority that, not long before the regular supply deliveries stopped, one last ship came in. A ship that never managed to leave when the Meth Quarter went up. A ship carrying a full load of processed foodstuffs. A ship that's still there."

That got silence from the crowd. A full shipment, untouched. That would set us up as kings. My stomach growled and protested at the thought.

"Bullshit! There's nothing left of the Quarter!" a metallic voice cut across the room like a rusty saw "The fires destroyed everything!"

That was Shadowchild. He was one of the Malatora Disapora. When Malatora was finally invaded, most of the smarter ones cut their losses and run hard and fast. The Seasteads were the perfect place to hide from the war crime charges. Shadowchild was lucky, he was wearing his 'Dragonoid' body at the time and was only two heads taller than the average guy. This meant he didn't have much problem catching a ride onto Libertaia and had actually made an almost tidy living before the Readjustment selling himself to closet

furries who'd heard all about the sexplay of the multi-donged Malatorans.

"Not true! This ship was docked just one subdivision over from the Quarter! The crew abandoned it when the fires started and left it there, hold just full of food waiting for someone to claim it, but nobody knows it hasn't been unloaded, because I have stolen the only manifest for the ship! Gentlemen! Somewhere out there... is the last unopened sack of Cheetos on this island, and I can lead you to it!"

The other side of the Quarter. That meant getting past pirate gangs, looters, 'Nist gangs and then crossing the decaying remains of the Quarter itself. This wouldn't be easy. But dear God, for just one more taste of that cheesey fucking deliciousness... maybe it was worth it...

The Randwich Horror

By Frozen Horse

We walked on, to the south-east. This side of the precariously welded and anchored arcology faced out upon the open ocean, and its waves. It was called the groaning district, due to the noise made by the cruel sea's interminable flexing of plate, beam, and weld. It tended to have fresher air, less stifled with the bouquet of cooking fires and raw sewage in the tropical sun, now setting. This came at the price of salt air that withered one's hydroponics and the knowledge that on any given night, corrosion and metal fatigue could take its ultimate toll and set you either adrift or to the bottom. This was worse in typhoon season, of course.

Pavlychko said, "We are near the lighthouse, it must be taken care of. Will only take a little time to find lighthouse-keeper."

I was flabbergasted. What would a lighthouse be doing here? For almost a century, long before the erection of even the central core, all navigation had been done via radio signals under computer control.

Lighthouses were extinct, as such. Some automated lights still marked the shoals around busy ports, but the harbour was on the more sheltered side, away from where we were headed. Even those harbour-lights were unmanned, and a visit to see any lighthouse-keeper would be a very one-sided conversation.

We marched on, keeping a wary eye on the sinewy locals and letting them know that we had an eye on them. They let us know through their hungry-desperate, yet apathetic, gaze that they were too malnourished to be capable of a serious attack, even with the benefit of twilight. My mind whirled further, wondering how would a lighthouse-keeper sustain

such a business in a tax and regulatory environment such as this. He could not expect any tax support unless by private agreement with the harbourmaster, and had no means at all to extract tolls from passing ships that might benefit from his light telling them that their GPS was not, in fact, broken.

And yet, I was pretty sure that there was a lighthouse, that this was not some absurdist joke on the part of Pavlychko. He didn't seem the type.

The shanties thinned abruptly and we stepped out on to steel decking that heaved gently in the swell. There seemed to be a radius where it was taboo, or at least ill-advised, to build. Ahead rose a derrick-like tower, Pavlychko listened for a break in the chatter, keyed his radio and said, "History-team to Base, we have reached the lighthouse. It appears to be inactive at present."

"Shut it down, permanently. Beware of angry customers." Pavlychko looked quizzical at that last bit, then with laconic, stoic boredom replied "Executing plan 23."

Suddenly, there was a flare of smoky yellow flame from the top of the derrick. A moaning chant of "Eeny-oony wanah!" rose from the surrounding rows of shanties. My mind filled with speculation as Pavlychko gestured for me to fill my hand with Beretta. Was this a some sort of cargo-cult, with the lighthouse as its totem? Did they hope to bring supply ships with the magic of their blazing flame? Was it an operation to lure ships into range of the pirates? If so, why all the chanting?

We got our answer soon enough. The shanty-dwellers began to emerge into the plaza, some in clustered knots dragging bundles of various size wrapped in blue tarps. If there was one common theme of 21st century poverty around the globe, it was the recognition of the superior utility of blue tarps. Pavlychko whispered into his radio, "Lighthouse now active, locals gathering. Appears they do some ritual now,

continue with plan 23a?"

"Negative. Find a concealed position, observe and report. Resume plan 23 when the area is clear."

I found myself being hoisted into the air, and grabbed hold of the plastic pallet roof of the adjacent shack. Once aloft, I reached down to lend a hand to Pavlychko who, being taller, had a much easier time of it. We took a careful look around to see if we had been noticed, then hunkered down in the falling gloom to watch the show.

If only we knew what anthropological delights were in store for us. A stoutly built, even fat, individual stepped down from the lighthouse. He seemed to be wearing only a leather apron. I knew from my travels that to be overweight implied a certain level of prosperity, especially in comparison to the wretches around him. What faith in their cargo-cult could drive them to keep their lighthouse-keeper so well fed, I wondered.

The assembled throng milled about, jostling for his attention as he inspected the apparently quite heavy bundles. Selecting one, he urged them on towards the tower. Ascending it, there was a pause and then a gouting flare to the light. The smoke thickened as well, and the wind brought it close by us. As we caught wind of the sweetish, peculiar smell of burning flesh, Pavlychko looked a bit queasy and then very angry. I made sure that my pistol was ready to fire, this was quite beyond mere cargo-cultism.

After interminable minutes of smoke, flaring light, and the occasional sizzling popping noise, the chanting reached a peak. Something was about to happen. There was a sudden grunting shout from the top of the so-called lighthouse and a humanoid form was thrown, smoking, to the deck below. The crowd set upon it with frenzied hunger, even as the lighthouse-keeper ambled down to select the next bundle. He strolled contentedly, licking his lips clean from whatever un-

speokable morsels were the benefits of his office.

Ritual cannibalism appears in human society in various places along the margins of viable places for settlement. The corpses of those felled in battle or by famine hold valuable sustenance for those who survive. Where people live in small bands with a protein-starved diet, the tribe over the next hill begins to look more and more appetizing. Many a lifeboat has been rescued with fewer aboard than who embarked. Here, on the precarious margins of an ill-conceived speck in the ocean, anthropophagy was the answer to how a libertarian paradise handled structural re-adjustments in the demand for labour.

I have seen many societies, interviewed countless people, some with very fandangled notions of what is sweet and proper. None were so degenerate or depraved as the spectacle to which we found ourselves the unwilling audience. This was a people that had, in this day and age, made their fellow-man their bacon. No excuse of ancient tradition or tribal practice could be made. No besieging army kept them here, only a stubborn mirage and a thousand miles of merciless ocean.

There was a shaking of the hut as Pavlychko raised his rifle. I looked on aghast as he aimed at the lighthouse-keeper. Then I saw why and was filled with greater dread. This chef of grim charcuterie had selected a bundle that appeared to be squirming. He had picked up a length of pipe which he appeared ready to use as a club when Pavlychko fired.

The lighthouse-keeper fell abruptly, amidst screams. The throng fled quickly, but we knew not whether this was prologue to them returning with arms. We dismounted from our now-exposed position and went towards the abandoned bundle.

Unwrapping it, we saw that it contained a small, very scared boy. I stood watch over the boy, pointing my pistol towards the darkness like I knew what I was doing while Pavlychko placed demolition charges from his pack on the legs of the

derrick. The radio crackled, “We hear gunfire from your area, what is going on?”

I answered the radio, stark terror cracking my voice, “This is no navigational fixture, it’s a God-damned cannibal barbecue. Pavlychko shot the lighthouse-keeper when he was about to club the main course.”

“Merde...” I could hear his longing for a cigarette to punctuate the pause. “OK, quick force is coming to you now. I’ll brief them on the way. Are there any surviving victims?”

“One boy.” I looked over at the occupant of the tarp. His quivering was more than fear, and he stank of malnutrition and slow death. “I think the kid’s got five aces, he’s going to need medevac.”

The platform was sited in the tropical ocean, where the original seastealers hoped to enjoy great tans, bountiful solar energy, and subservient dusky maidens or nobly savage men who knew their place, or both, as taste demanded. Things that came with this choice of location included typhoons, and malaria. Malaria, like high finance, constantly mutates in the face of applied pressures.

Thus, Novglaredmersmikl Amalgamated, one of two remaining pharmaceutical conglomerates had ample opportunities to test new drugs, and used to do so out here where the regulations and reporting requirements were lax. One of the fruits of their labours was fluorodeoxybromethoquinidine, which I had taken a pill of this very morning. It’s a great drug and will, if taken once a day, completely skullfuck any plasmodium that so much as thinks of trying to infect a red blood cell. However, if you lack adequate dietary intake of vitamins A, C, and E, your liver metabolizes it into 8-hydroxy fluorodeoxybromethoquinidinone, a potent neurotoxin. The resulting syndrome was called five aces after the amounts and types of vitamins involved in the differential metabolism. This was not a concern to Novglaredmersmikl executives, who planned

on getting their profit from well-fed tourists. It was a concern to the boy.

In the distance, I could hear approaching boots on steel, interspersed with shouting in Arabic, Tagalog, Hokkien, Patois, and the very occasional three-round burst. Picking out words in English, I could hear a very loud, commanding, bass voice speaking with a southern U.S. african-american accent saying, "Bread or lead, motherfuckers! How you want it is how we've got it. You want help out of this, you got it. You want to keep on with your Donner party shit, I'll kill you myself."

Eventually, the response-force reached us and I beheld the source of the voice. A surprisingly short, coffee-complected individual strode out of the darkness at the head of a column of the hardest bunch of humanitarians I had yet seen. One of them heard a fleet-footed rushing noise, whirled, threw, and beaned a charging cultist with a packet of plumpynut. He then raised his rifle and waited. The cultist grabbed the nutrient-rich packet and vanished into the scrap tin and chaos.

"Shen, fall in."

"Yes sir, I'm Xuen, that's Shen."

"Right then. Lieutenant Hudonieux and crew, here to relieve you. What the hell is going on here, you were supposed to observe and ... oh shit."

"Yeah."

Pavlychko interjected, tears in his throat, "Once, I was a small boy. Great-grandfather got more drunk than usual. He told me of what happened one winter in Leningrad. I swore never again."

"Shit man, I would have done the same thing to this fucker and all I've got as excuse is that I'm a ragin' afro-asian cajun and I don't cotton to murderous cannibals. Are those charges rigged? By sunup, everybody in this town is going to be saying that they were the lone vegetarian and that all this was those other guys.... Whatever lets them sleep at night."

Pavlychko nodded and pushed the detonator. Cobaltothermic demolition charges burnt through several main struts in a carefully devised sequence and, groaning, the tower fell into the sea. There was a moan of dismay and terror from the shadowed eyes watching this scene as it hit the water with a large splash.

Oddly, it seemed like the splash was reflected, as if from some opposite side of a channel. This should have been impossible, since the next land was thousands of leagues distant. "Xuen, get me some light out there!"

There was the deep thud of a grenade launcher, and then the coruscating glare of a parachute flare illuminating a terrible, wrong, mind-destroying truth. The ritual was not merely for the benefit of the cultists, but also for a weird, huge other guest to these proceedings. To know that there are things like that that share our earth is to never sleep soundly again.

Aroused by the splash of the derrick, it roiled the dark waters and then extended tentacles onto the deck. I threw the boy to Shen and made a leap to safety as they writhed like unheld fire-hoses in blind search. Then, grasping the offal from the first course of the diabolical feast, as well as the still-warm body of the lighthouse-keeper, they withdrew.

We retreated back into the shelter and stench of the floating world, what we had seen was above and beyond our capabilities, armamentarium, and pay grade.

Xuen turned to Shen, "Fuck the ocean, man."

The Ties That Bind

By ohnorobot

“I know how the media likes to paint a picture with broad strokes. They call the Randipelago the “Fourth World Country”, the playground for loonies and the terminally bored rich. But the sad truth is that not everyone on the islands came from the same western “fuck you, got mine” mentality that they claim is the national slogan. The truth is that every time something gets built that “they say couldn’t be done” its because “they” usually expect certain things of the people attempting to build the impossible; things like paying and feeding your workers, adhering to some kind of structural guidelines, and having the same set of blueprints in the morning as you did before a night of mescaline. But when you want to do the impossible, within a budget, you usually end up stepping on a lot of people.”

Pao puts down his cigar and tilts back a glass of rice wine of some unpronounceable name. He’s in his late 20’s but constant exposure to the sun, salt and airborne toxins of life on the platforms, or Plats, has given him the appearance of a chain smoking 50 year old. Inside the shipping container he calls a home, a bundle of Christmas lights hangs from the ceiling, illuminating a few timid pairs of eyes from the back of the shelter.

“Back in the day, my family, one of many, heard the sales pitches and signed up. Not that we hadn’t heard the same rhetoric before from the UAE; “Come! There are jobs to be had, and there is money to be made!”

Not that we believed them, but our family was larger and hungrier than it had been before. So we came, and we built the platforms. Collectively, the Randipelago is the largest

man-made structure on the planet now. Most of it is flotsam, not even something I'd call structure, but hey, we built it. Of course the building was the easy part. My people have been building the impossible for decades, often at the whim of the insane and rich.

"When the Plats were done, we stood back and asked 'What now?'"

And we were told 'Now? Now you are free!'" Pao waves his hands expansively, his cigar trailing smoke. "Yes, free to make money, to buy back your passports and your boats, oh did you think you were living here for free?"

"There were never any shortages of work though, not for us. The one thing that's always needed, it more space. So whenever someone needed more land, they'd need a welder, like my father. See, on the Plats, growth isn't dictated by any kind of philosophy or vision. Its dictated by that-" Pao nods to a pair of metal cylinders in the corner: one red, one yellow.

"Oxy-Acetylene."

"If you just came over on a boat, or a raft, or a sheet of tin, first thing you need to do is ask around till you find a welder. Then you pay him. Then he pays some guards. Then you, the welder, and the guards all stomp out to the fringes of the Plats, bribing a few people along the way, till you get to whatever piece of shit you lashed your hopes to and sailed halfway around the world in. Then the welder does his job, and the nation gets that much bigger. And if hes good, he'll weld you to a decent piece of steel and might tell you how to survive your first night."

"Welders made the Plats, and they never stopped. Whole mini-societies formed up around them, making sure they had a steady stream of Oxy-Acetylene, and the Welders made sure that when families showed up from the mainland, they wouldn't drift away in the night. And if you got in deep, and found yourself in a labor contract with someone with a repu-

tation, you could turn to your welder and he, and his enclave might scrape together enough collectively to buy your contract."

Pao leans over the thin plywood table pours himself more wine. " 'Course, just because we built the land, doesn't mean we get to pick our neighbors. Anyone who could weld, could dictate city planning. So, one day a group calling themselves the Ascendants pulls up next to our enclave in a decommissioned aircraft carrier and starts setting up shop. Nice enough guys at first, but something about they way they'd talk would put you on edge, like they were reading from a pamphlet all the time."

"Wasn't till the night of the fire that we found out what they were really up to. See, they thought that the 'pelago was the promised land on earth, and it would lead them to the kingdom of heaven. But of course in order to get into heaven, first you need to make money. They didn't have a lot of converts, but what they did have, was a few chemists, so naturally they turn to cooking meth to turn a quick buck. Meth lab explosions aren't uncommon on the Plats, and we had been smelling fumes from cooking for weeks, though we couldn't pin down where it was coming from. So a bunch of us start kicking on some water pumps to hose down the gaping hole in the carrier and keep the blaze contained." He takes a deep breath.

"BOOM." says Pao, accenting the "oo" with a double smoke ring. "Turns out the eggheads on the ship weren't just there to cook crystal. Every cent they had that wasn't being poured back into their meth factory was financing the production of a rocket to take them all to the pearly gates. The chemists they had were also working a double shift producing barrels full of ammonium perchlorate."

"The first blast knocked the whole Plat on its ass and sent all the Ascendants straight to their heavenly reward. Most

people didn't look back, just took what they could carry and ran for the water. But something strange happened: collectively, without a word of coordination, welders from all over the zone grabbed their kits, gathered along the seams connecting the carrier and started cutting the ship free of the platform. Wasn't just welders too, some people just found sledgehammers, crowbars, axes, trying to cut through steel with an edge forged out of desperation.

I was only 13 at the time, wasn't till the morning after when I found that crater that had been my father, a red-hot girder had slid off the deck above him and landed on his tanks. In they end, they managed to cut that fucking beast loose before it took the lot of them with it, from the way it went up you'd think they had enough perchlorate to sail that boat to Mars."

Pao stands up to let me and my guide out to the courtyard formed between the stacks of "houses". Outside, the air stinks of burning tires, but its quiet, without the constant low level firefights that make up the other parts of the Randipelago.

"Word got around fast, not only could we add onto the nation, but we can subtract from it too. Fear of being cut loose was all that was needed to get some of our contracts dissolved or renegotiated, and start getting people coming home from work with pay.

Nothing scares a man more, it turns out, than to be cut completely and utterly free."

The Ground Gained

By Heresiarch

*!*** PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT: PRE-EDIT INTERVIEW FOOT-AGE*

10 JUNE 2042

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-ing you have to remember is that this was well before China's breakthroughs with thorium reactors and the way they were sold to the public as a safe alternative to traditional nuclear plants. People still remembered what happened at Fukushima, and most western nations had ceased production of new plants. Some had even shut down their existing nuclear power programs and simply increased their reliance on fossil fuels.

I: Like Germany.

N: Yes, like Germany. People with backgrounds in nuclear engineering had a more limited number of options available. One of those people was Stephen Wearstler.

I: What kind of background did he have?

N: Wearstler was what you might call a science hustler. He had a bachelor's in nuclear chemistry from MIT, but his

grades were poor enough that the graduate programs didn't want him. In the research world, a BS degree won't get you very far, but there's always a market for people who can sound authoritative while being paid to say things.

At the time, the nuclear industry in the United States was in decline due to the bad PR from the Fukushima disaster, and was not very well regulated. Wearstler looked good on camera, and so ended up working for the Nuclear Energy Institute, and did work on the side for various libertarian think tanks.

I: That's where he met Tom Flint, isn't it?

N: That's right. Flint was old oil money, and understood that once the world's reserves started to dry up, the big money was going to be in petrochemical materials, not fuel. You can't make any of the alternative energy systems without at least a few parts made from petrochemicals.

However, Flint wasn't actually in control of the family's business. He was rich from inheritance but held very little power. He was also a libertarian, and a tax dodger.

Since Flint was friendly to nuclear energy, and had similar political views, he and Wearstler got along very well. Eventually, after Hurricane Diana largely destroyed his family's refining and shipping equipment in Houston, they came up with that infamous project.

I: Did it ever have a name other than "Site A"?

N: Not as far as we've been able to find out.

Flint purchased an oil rig that sat a few hundred kilometers west of the Chilean coast. It had been a consistent but underwhelming performer, so the original owners were keen to recoup some of their losses. Flint wasn't planning on us-

ing it for fuel, though. He wanted to build a manufacturing base around it, since there's otherwise very little in the way of natural resources out in the ocean.

I: Why the ocean, then?

N: These were libertarians. They wanted their grand project to be away from the control of any national government. It was either somewhere out in the ocean, or nowhere at all.

The center of their project was the rig, which had been nicknamed "la nada" by the previous owners. It was a spar type, so theoretically they could move it to another site if they ran dry. They hired out-of-work oil crew to start building a structure made of recycled shipping containers around it, and within a couple of years they had something resembling "land" to work on top of.

I: Is that when the refugees started showing up?

N: No, that was later, and it's not really relevant to what happened. Flint's human rights abuses were appalling, but really outside my field of study, I'm sorry to say.

Eventually, Wearstler got to build his dream nuclear power plant. They weren't going to use the oil for fuel, because that was what they were going to use to make plastics and other materials. They had been using mostly solar up to that point, but that wasn't going to be enough to continue the project.

Now, what a lot of people don't realize is that Fukushima was innately a very safe design. It was hit by the second-largest largest natural disaster to ever strike Japan, and it was run by incompetents and crooks. But the damage from the Fukushima disaster was limited to a relatively small area both on land and at sea. Had the plant been run competently, the effects might have been ever smaller.

Wearstler's plant was... how do I say this... not designed competently. The intent of this project was profit, and Flint's initial investments were starting to run dry, so Site A's nuclear plant was made on a shoestring budget, and Wearstler was not a brilliant man.

What really doomed the project was that he thought he was. He had, in his mind, a new and innovative variant on a graphite moderated reactor that could be built for very cheap and in the end be safer than the other reactors of the day.

I: Would you say that's the only cause of the disaster?

N: No, there were other issues. The companies that Wearstler contracted to build some of the reactor components did not deliver on their claims. For example, later analysis showed that the fuel channels were half as thick as they were in the original specifications. It also turns out that some of the fuel rods that Wearstler had purchased under the counter from contacts in the American nuclear industry were also not up to par, which is why they weren't being used in the first place.

However, Wearstler should have been able to discover these problems during construction and testing, if he was as competent as he thought he was.

I: Obviously he wasn't.

N: No, not at all.

The Site A reactor ran for about a week before the first failure. This should have been a sign that there were further problems with the basic design, but Wearstler's hubris prevented him from shutting it down for a failure analysis. It was back up within twenty-four hours.

Three days later, the core of the reactor went out of control and burned its way through containment. It hit the sea wa-

ter below and caused a catastrophic steam explosion, which shredded the core of Site A, including the oil production facility, and threw radioactive material for miles around.

I: Were there any survivors?

N: Not in the core, no. It's believed that Wearstler died in the steam explosion along with the rest of the plant's crew, since he was known to have been on-site during the plant's operation.

There were survivors further out on the extended platform, but most of them died from the resulting fires, from radiation effects, and from drowning when the platform eventually collapsed. Flint would have been some distance away from the core when it failed, in his living quarters, but it's unknown what actually happened to him. It's generally assumed that he died when his living quarters burned. There were a handful of refugees and workers still alive when rescue teams finally made it there, and one container-ship boat that was docked at Site A had all of its crew survive.

The immediate loss of life was not the worst of it, though.

I: Was this the first radioactive oil spill in history?

N: That depends on how you define "radioactive", since there is natural radioactive material in nearly all raw petroleum. But this was the first one with material from a-

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(The Hague, Netherlands - 10 Jan 2045) Businessman and entrepreneur Frederick Snowden was convicted today of crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court. Charges against Snowden included slave trafficking, inhumane acts against a civilian population, and organized sexual violence.

Snowden was the founder and private owner of Global Labor Services, a combined debt collection agency and private military contractor. GLS was headquartered in the former “free city” of Neritica. His legal defense argued against the jurisdiction of the ICC due to Neritica’s unusual status under international law, but the court ruled that Snowden’s activities in UN membership states were subject to prosecution.

Prosecutor I-Ming Shen spoke at the press conference, stating that Snowden’s conviction was proof that “those who would use the ideas of freedom to murder and enslave others” would be eventually brought to justice.

In a separate statement, Snowden’s defense attorney Elliot Foster called the ruling “a blow against the very ideas of international sovereignty and corporate personhood”.

Global Labor Services was used extensively as local security forces in impoverished nations by international corporations who relied on local labor. It is believed that GLS was responsible for the disappearance of over six thousand local employees of the Clark/Foreston tungsten mining and manufacturing complex in Bolivia. This was the location that provided

the most evidence for Snowden's prosecution, including extensive communications records proving his involvement in GLS's day-to-day operations. After Bolivia's neosocialist revolution in 2032, the nationalization of the complex led to the revelation of the crimes committed there.

Local laborers working for corporations based out of Neritica would find themselves in debt to their employers, only to find that their contracts placed them in a form of indentured servitude. These debts would be purchased by GLS, who would normally forcibly remove the debtor to one of their headquarters in Neritica. They would be held there until their assignment for forced labor at another one of GLS's client companies.

In most cases, female debtors and the female relatives of male debtors would be forced into prostitution, on Neritica or at client company sites. Eliza de La Vega, Neritica escapee and author of the book "Machines of Steel and Fear", provided testimony in the Snowden trial about his company's activities.

GLS was one of many companies, also including Clark/Foreston, which attempted to use the poorly-defined nation status of Neritica as a shield against prosecution. This ruling by the ICC makes it less likely that companies will try such tactics in the future.

Snowden was captured during the arrival of UN peacekeeping forces in Neritica, following the south Atlantic tsunami in August 2036 and the collapse of Neritica's financial and social structures. His business partner Dieter Föstung is believed to be hiding in the remains of the Congo states.

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Gods Among Men

By Azatoth

From the excerpts journal of John H. Galt II:

March 8, 137 AR: We launch today! It's been almost ten years of planning and sacrifice, but today we launch. We're heading for the south Atlantic, where there's no hurricanes to worry about and plenty of tropical sun year round. I've taken my inheritance and bought one of the three docks, some warehouses, and an apartment in one of the nicer apartment towers just outside the docks district. I want to be close to my investments, but not so close that the workers will become too familiar. I want a hushed awe to fall over my workers when I make my inspections. The sight of a captain of industry deigning to walk amongst will no doubt spur them to increased productivity!

June 12, 137 AR: Seems that the people on the mainland can't wait to come to Objectopia. Since we announced our intentions to the world, all of the lazy parasites back in their socialist hellholes have told us how we will fail, but now it seems that their people are leaving them by the boatload to live in our glorious paradise. I understand that the first boat of settlers will be arriving next week.

June 21, 137 AR: Just returned from a business meeting with the other dock owners. Those goddamn ship captains played us off each other good and before long we were bidding for the right to their business instead of the other way around. None of us want a repeat of that little fiasco so we've all agreed on a fair, fixed price for all ships coming and go-

ing, based off either their tonnage or how many settlers they are leaving. We don't want every pissant ship's captain playing us off each other just to save a few rands in docking and resupply fees, and now they can't. Per the contract we drew up, we'll meet every three months and adjust prices. The free market rewards me!

November 3, 137 AR: My vision is paying dividends. Before Objectopia launched, I debated between purchasing a dock or a section of housing, and it appears that I have made the right call. Once people figured out that you can just weld a container ship to the side and partition it as housing, the market for living space crashed.

However, the big ships can't just dock anywhere and my dock can barely keep up with the demand in traffic. The workers are having to put in 12-18 hour days just to keep up with demand, but they're under contract at the wages they agreed on before the traffic spike. I'm making a fortune.

January 21, 138 AR: There was an explosion at the dock yesterday. One of the cranes malfunctioned while unloading a set of ship-to-ship missiles Consolidated Security Solutions contracted me to bring in. I am given to understand that one of those piece of shit Russian cranes malfunctioned and dropped a crate of missiles as it was being moved, which started a chain reaction that detonated the entire hold. Now, not only do I have to pay to fix my dock, I need to order a new shipment of missiles to fulfill my contract and I have to get it here quick. I heard what those psychopaths at Consolidated did to the last guy who welched on a contract with them and that will not happen to me. Goddamn workers should have maintained those cranes better.

January 24, 138 AR: Since my wage-cutting announcement,

there has been nightly riots against my decision to recoup my losses in the missile debacle by cutting worker pay. As the savvy captain of industry that I am, I built a clause into their contract so that if a worker is lazy or negligent, I'm legally allowed to dock their pay until I've recouped the losses they've caused me. The contract clearly states that the maintenance of the tools necessary for the work is the responsibility of every worker on the docks. And, since it was all their responsibilities to maintain that crane, I'm docking all of their pay. If they didn't like the contract, they shouldn't have signed it.

January 26, 138 AR: I'm told that the dock workers have decided to form a union in response to my shrewd negotiating, in plain contravention of their fairly-signed labor contract. They're demanding a shorter work week and a return to previous pay levels. Those bastards should be grateful I don't label them contract-breakers and hire replacements. Those bastards would starve if they didn't have my work. No one in Objectopia would hire a contract-breaker. The damn parasites insist that the accident wasn't their fault. They say that I don't give them the necessary time or equipment to do maintenance. All they want is to get out of their fairly negotiated contract and they're trying to use this as a flimsy excuse. It's their safety on the line if they don't maintain the tools, they should have kept up with it. After all, I couldn't be expected to know the crane was going to break, could I? They were around that crane every day, they should have fixed it if it wasn't safe.

January 28, 138 AR: For two consecutive days, no traffic has moved in or out of my dock because of this damn strike. I'm left with no choice but hire strikebreakers. The guy who owns the desalinisation plant in the next district over recommended Sharp Steel Security. A standard clause in their

contract says that if they don't get the strikers back to work in 48 hours, I only owe them 50% of the regular fee. Given their fee, I'm half-hoping the workers hold out for exactly 49 hours. These bastards are expensive as hell, but a captain of industry such as myself will not be bullied around by some snout-nosed parasites.

January 29, 138 AR: I met with owner of Sharp Steel Security, a Mr. Harper, and I'm not ashamed to say that he scares me. I'm not one to be intimidated easily, but I couldn't wait for the meeting to be over. When he looks at you, it's this cold, dead fish stare. I am sure he could kill me and not feel a thing about it. He went over the details of the contract with me, made sure that I agreed to all of it. I didn't read most of it or hear a lot of what he said, all I could think of was getting away from that psychopath. Once he'd gone over the contract and verified the payment was received, he let me leave. It took all of my will not to just run back home and hide.

January 30, 138 AR: The strikebreakers were very effective...very, very effective... I must admit that I was not prepared for the level of...effectiveness...that Sharp Steel Security demonstrated. Mr. Harper insisted that I accompany him to the docks to personally oversee negotiations, but I don't know why I was there. We didn't do any negotiating like I'd ever been a part of. I'd expected him to say something other than "Fire!" when the workers came out to negotiate. I really thought we were going to negotiate with words, not guns. I've never seen a person shot before. There was so much blood and screaming.

Once the shooting started, the workers broke and ran quickly, but Mr. Harper was ready. His team herded them back to one of the warehouses near the docks. A bunch more got shot trying to escape. At Mr. Harper's suggestion, I've locked

them in there for the night so that they can all discuss their options. We are going back at dawn to renegotiate their contracts.

January 31, 138 AR: With Mr. Harper's assistance, I was able to renegotiate a fair and equitable contract with the workers, which I feel addresses all outstanding concerns. They have agreed not to unionize and have agreed to be paid in company scrip in lieu of rands to help me recoup the losses that their strike caused.

Because of this development, I've decided to use the rest of my cash reserves to purchase several of the apartment buildings near the docks. They may just be converted shipping containers, but it's a place they can call home. One of the larger buildings also has enough space on the bottom floor for me to set up my own company store. I'm sure my workers will find it most convenient to be able to buy all their necessary items so conveniently close to home and I've been able to find a new business opportunity where once there was none. I truly am a captain of industry!

February 1, 138 AR: My foremen have given me a final tally and I've lost 42% of my workforce. I've learned my lesson when negotiating contracts with security services. The next one I negotiate will include provisions for getting the workers back to work unharmed and able bodied. Those workers aren't any good to me dead. Also, I'm still angry over having to pay Mr. Harper full price despite him killing so many of my workers. Apparently, our contract stated that if more than 51% of the workers return to the job, he is considered to have fulfilled his contract. There was also something about a combat bonus, since they discharged their weapons. I didn't recall either of those clauses, but when I checked my copy of the contract, they were there.

However, when I brought up all the deaths to him, he said that he felt bad about the lost productivity, so he and his team are performed a little “after-sale service” on their way out of the docks. He said that it was very effective in ensuring that the workers don’t strike again. I wish I’d said something more than “just don’t kill more of them on the way out” to him. I really wish I’d said something more.

February 5, 138 AR: I allowed the workers to cut the bodies down earlier today. I admit, I was sceptical at first about the after-sale service, but it was quite effective in keeping the workers in line. They went right back to work and worked their full shifts without any of the usual griping and moaning.

In the end, I wanted to keep the bodies up longer but I didn’t have much of a choice, the stench was beginning to reach my apartment and some of the ship captains were threatening to take their business to other docks if I didn’t do something about the flies and the smell.

I’ve had to beef up security at my apartment after a few workers tried to break in last night, but that’s the cost of doing business. Fortunately, the building security was able to kill them before they made it up here. Glad I bought the upgraded security service with the lethal force package when I got this place. I would have been in trouble without it. The automated machine gun nests were particularly effective. I used to find the high-pitched whine of the servo motors to be annoying, now I have trouble sleeping if I can’t hear it.

February 12, 138 AR: My docks aren’t able to keep up with traffic and I’m losing out on potential business. The workers remain quite motivated and seem to don’t mind putting in 18 hour days, but I just don’t have enough of them. Unfortunately, the free market is failing me. After word got out about

my contracts and what Sharp Steel Security did, no one wants to negotiate a work contract with me. I guess that's the price for being a hard-negotiating captain of industry. In any case, I'm still profitable, but not for long at this rate. I need to find more workers and fast.

March 7, 138 AR: I never should have doubted the free market. I've just received word that there's a boat of refugees fleeing some mainland junta and I've been in communication with the captain of their ship. They've apparently stolen a near-derelect passenger liner and crammed it to the gills with people. On the way out, the ship apparently took some damage and they can't make it far, but they think they can make it to Objectopia. It turns out that they don't have much money, but they've agreed to do some work for me in exchange for me waiving the dock fees and allowing them to use my dock to repair their ship.

March 9, 138 AR: The refugee boat arrived, albeit a day later than expected. Despite this setback, I was able to negotiate a very favorable contract with them to use the docking facilities. It really helped negotiations when their ship began listing heavily to port and I called for a tug to take it out to sea, so that it wouldn't damage my dock when it sank. The refugees became very motivated to negotiate at that point and I think we were able to conclude an agreement by which everyone benefitted. After all, it's not my fault that they fled in such a decrepit ship. As a true captain of industry, I just take advantage whatever opportunities life throws my way.

To compensate me for the use of my facilities, all able-bodied people on the boat will work for me for a period of six months and agree to be paid just like my other dock workers. They'll then purchase dock facilities, as well as any other essentials from me in company scrip. I expect that many will

even want to stay here when their boat is fixed. Once they've had a taste of the free market, I can't imagine them settling for anything else again.

September 6, 138 AR: The refugee's labor contract is up today, but I don't think they'll be leaving. They currently owe me 1,564,982 megabucks of company scrip for past-due dock fees and associated costs related to the repair of their ship. It's not my fault that they negotiated a poor contract. However, I've agreed to be generous and not sell their ship for scrap to recoup my losses. In exchange, they've agreed to work for me for another year, and in exchange, I'll increase their pay by 40% and reduce the balance they owe to an even million. I've made so much money off of dock fees that I've been able to purchase the rest of the district. I now have a very nice portfolio of warehouses and apartment buildings. I may even have enough money to open a competing utility next year. By fortune and my own savvy business sense, I truly am the master of my own destiny, just as I deserve.

December 4, 138 AR: Apparently, some of my workers aren't happy about the 100% increase in the cost of rent and the 75% increase in the cost of items at the company store for anyone paying with company scrip. They really should have realized that their pay raises would only result in an increased amount of scrip entering the market, thereby driving down it's worth. It's basic economics. I had no choice but to raise rent and prices because of the devaluation of the scrip.

February 1, 139 AR: I've had to hire Mr. Harper again. I really didn't want to, but the refugees threatened to seize control of the ship and leave without paying their bill. They agreed to the contract and I'll see them uphold their part, even if I have to force them. As soon as Mr. Harper walked onto the dock, my workers were able to convince the refugees

to stay. He's a useful man, that Mr. Harper. He said that we should kill a few of them, because of the inconvenience that they've caused me, but I decided against that. I don't think Mr. Harper was very happy, but that's not really my concern. The contract clearly states that he can't kill, maim, harass, or otherwise harm my workers without my approval. I still had to pay him a good many rands just to walk out onto the dock and it known that I'd hired him, but there's always costs associated with hiring the best.

April 28, 139 AR: The workers are looking at me strangely again and I can see the hatred in their eyes. I think they're plotting something, so I've hired Sharp Steel Security to supplement my apartment's security staff and also to help keep the workers at the dock in line. We've had a rash of people run off from their contracts lately, so Mr. Harper has set up checkpoints at all exists from my district. I just don't understand why these parasites have such a problem fulfilling a simple labor contract. We negotiated it together, it's not my fault that I bargain from a position of strength. It's like they want me to reward them for coming to a negotiation in a weak bargaining position. Lazy parasites.

May 10, 139 AR: There was an attempt on my life yesterday. I don't know where my workers got those guns, but I intend to find out. Fortunately, Sharp Steel Security was able to get me out of there quickly. I'm afraid that the workers may have come to mistake my kindness for weakness. I give them everything they need to survive and all I ask for is a little labor in return. Ungrateful, that's what they are. I give them everything they need and still they want more. I may have to use tougher methods of dealing with them. Mr. Harper has agreed to personally get to the bottom of the assassination attempt and I have every confidence that he will.

May 14, 139 AR: Mr. Harper has found the people responsible for the attempt on my life. Per the laws of Objectopia, they have been exiled in an open boat. As is my right as the wronged party, I elected to allow them the traditional bottle of water, but denied them the handgun and the single bullet. I sincerely hope that all of my workers have learned a lesson from this ugly episode and that they can leave this all in the past and get back to work.

May 20, 139 AR: I've been thinking a lot about where my workers got those guns and I keep coming back to one, inescapable conclusion. They must have gotten them from Mr. Harper. No one else has been around the district with guns and the checkpoints prevent the workers from leaving the district without my express permission. Mr. Harper must have formed some kind of alliance with them to steal what is rightfully mine.

May 27, 139 AR: I confronted Mr. Harper today, along with my new security detail, which I had to hire at exorbitant cost from VilCo Solutions. I asked him why he gave guns to my workers, to which he looked me square in the eyes and denied it, as I expected he would, but I'm sure that it was him. That bastard wants me gone so he can come in and claim my property. I'm sure of it.

June 10, 139 AR: I'm starting to think that it wasn't such a good idea to hire someone to follow Mr. Harper and catch him delivering guns to my workers. I found the man's head in my freezer yesterday. Today, I woke up and his headless body was sitting in my favorite chair. My bodyguards say that no one came or left, but I'm sure that Mr. Harper has bought them off. I can't trust anyone.

June 17, 139 AR: I woke up this morning to find many small things in my apartment had been moved just a little. Nothing obvious, but someone had clearly been in there snooping around. No idea what they expected to find, but they're clearly after something important. The guards claim that no one came in or out, as did building security, but they're all either in league with Mr. Harper and those worker parasites or just plainly incompetent. I've informed VilCo that I'm voiding the contract because of a non-delivery of services, my safety and peace-of-mind being the service. They vehemently disagreed with my assessment of the situation and now I've been black-listed from every security service provider in Objectopia as a contract-breaker.

June 20, 139 AR: I have been lucky. Very lucky. Mr. Harper and the workers haven't moved on me yet. I have a meeting tomorrow with a man who goes by Carlos, though I'm sure it's not his real name. He's willing to sell me some weapons, despite my status amongst the security community. I will have to pay exorbitantly I am sure, but it's the only way that I can protect myself from those animals.

June 21, 139 AR: I am now armed. I bought an assault rifle, a pair of handguns, a small bag full of grenades, several kilos of explosives to safeguard my apartment, and something he called a smartbomb that he says will kill everything in a ten meter radius when it's set off. It's got a bunch of writing in Russian on it, which I can't read. When I asked how to work it, Carlos said to press the big red button twice and then run like hell. He was unsure as to how long I would have before it went off, so he said to run fast.

June 25, 139 AR: I fought off some intruders last night. They came up the stairwell and right to my door. I put sev-

eral bullets through the door as they were preparing to kick it down. I don't know if I hit anyone, but I heard a lot of screaming and cursing as they retreated. I can't sleep. I know they're out there, just waiting for me to fall asleep before they kick my door down.

June 27, 139 AR: A representative from Sharp Steel Security came to the door today and asked why I'd shot at their agents the night before. I told him that he needed to leave, as I did not give him permission to enter the building. He said that the owner of the apartment building was concerned about the gunfire and presence of explosives on the premises, and that he'd Sharp Steel Security them to investigate. I told him to screw off. He said a bunch more stuff, but I didn't listen. I'm sure that I'll be evicted now, there's a clause in my rental contract against having more than 1kg of explosives in your apartment.

July 4, 139 AR: I got my eviction notice today. I have 14 days to vacate the premises or they will use force to remove me. I'm sure that they wanted to evict me right now, but the rental contract says they have to give me 14 days notice. Let them try to kick me out, I'll be ready. I snuck out last night and visited Carlos. I spent the last of my cash reserves to get some land mines with tripwire fuses, some body armor and a few more bullets. I've spent the day fortifying the entryway and living room. Whoever that parasite of a building owner hires to evict me is in for a nasty surprise. I don't plan to be here when they come.

July 16, 139 AR: I shot someone today. I didn't mean to. I... really didn't mean to. I just panicked. The owner of the apartment building knocked on the door this morning. He knocked really loud. I thought that it was them trying to break down

the door. I put several rounds through the door with my assault rifle and...he got hit. I didn't mean to kill him, I really didn't. I thought he was coming to kick me out and take everything I'd worked for. I think he's still out in the hall. I can't bring myself to look. He made some noises until around noon then he stopped making noises. I didn't hear anyone come get him. I swear I didn't mean for this to happen. I just wanted to run my dock and live the good life like the true captain of industry that I am. It's all these goddamn parasites here, ruining everything.

July 18, 139 AR: They came for me last night, but I was already gone. It happened around 7:30 PM, or at least that's when I heard what I assume to be the sound of my arsenal detonating. I'm in a back section of one of my warehouses now, down near my docks. I can see that my workers have been loading supplies onto that ship of theirs all day. I know that they're going to break their contracts and run, and I can't hire any of the security service providers to stop them, because I'm on that goddamn black-list. Well, they're not going to get away clean, not while I've got this smartbomb Carlos sold me. I'm going to put it on the bridge of the ship and set it off. That should keep them in the dock for a while and make me a hefty sum in repair bills while they fix whatever it is that this thing does. I wish I could read Russian. I'll use the money I make off this to find a new apartment and maybe buy my way off that black-list. These goddamn workers need to be taught a lesson.

July 19, 139 AR: I'm going to find Carlos and kill him. As soon as I pushed the big red button, the display lit up. I pushed it again and all it did was hiss and then shoot mist everywhere. I freaked out a little bit because I thought that it was shooting acid out at me. Then I noticed that it kinda

smelled like pine. It kinda only itched a little where it hit my skin, but it washed off fine. I bet that parasite wired up some air fresheners and had a good laugh at my expense. I've tried to set up another meeting, but I couldn't reach him. I bet he's run off with my money.

July 21, 139 AR: I've taken up residence in the wheelhouse of the worker's ship and I think that living around all these goddamn workers has made me sick. They're so goddamn filthy. I've taken to making nightly sorties for food and other supplies. I'm sure those goddamn parasite workers would be shocked to learn that, after years of stealing from me, I'm forced to steal from them. If they want to take their precious ship, they'll have to come kick me out and after what happened to my apartment, I don't think they have the stomach for it.

July 23, 139 AR: I haven't been feeling well for a while, so I tried to go to the hospital in the next district over today, but I got turned back at the property line. Something's making everyone around here sick and word's gotten out. I asked the parasites guarding the border what gave them the right to deny a captain of industry the free movement of Objectopia and they just leveled their guns at me. I thought about fighting my way through, but then decided against it. Bullet wounds are expensive to treat and I just need some antibiotics. I did manage to trade one of my pistols for a bottle of Amoxicillin though, so the trip wasn't a whole waste. On my walk back to the ship, everyone scrambled to get out of my way. If I can't be respected, at least I am feared.

July 25, 139 AR: I woke up this morning to the sound of cutting torches and metal grinding on metal. I armed myself quickly and ran out of the wheelhouse. I expected to find the

workers cutting the cables and stealing the ship. I only wish it was that. Apparently, whatever disease is running rampant through my district is so virulent that the rest of Objectopia has decided on a more permanent kind of quarantine, we're being cut away from the main body of Objectopia. Exile for an entire district, left to drift wherever the currents will take us. They're nearly though cutting us away.

July 26, 139 AR: We're now clear of Objectopia. I suppose that I'm now in charge of castaway district, though I don't know what good it will do me. My workers have stopped listening to me entirely. I suppose that this ship of sorts deserves a name, though I can't think of one, nor do I think it'll matter. Whatever is making us sick appears to be fatal. Many of the weaker workers have already succumbed to it. They're wrapping them in whatever is at hand and burying them at sea. There's lesions all over my skin and they're not getting better. I think that Amoxicillin I bought was nothing more than sugar pills.

July 27, 139 AR: All of the workers who were able have loaded themselves up into the ship, but they can't leave. The ship's engines barely work and apparently couldn't overcome the current flowing into the dock, so they are going to wait until we rotate around. Should be some time tomorrow before that happens, then they can slip out and go wherever their lazy, rotten hearts take them. If I could hold my weapons up anymore, I would go out there and enforce their contract with me, but I cannot. I'm too weak to hold up the assault rifle, and I can barely aim the pistol. Everyone left out there who isn't on the ship is unable to walk. There won't be anyone to bury the dead once the ship leaves.

July 28, 139 AR: The ship left last night and I spit at it as it

went. Those ungrateful parasites will no doubt be freeloading off someone else before this time tomorrow. Good riddance to them I say. I've moved to the roof of one of the taller buildings, though it took me considerable effort just to get up and walk around. If I'm going to die, it's going to be with a good view of all my possessions. I know I can't take them with me, but I can at least look at them as I go.

July 29, 139 AR: Looks like those parasites on the boat got what they deserved. At dawn, I was awoken by the sound of jets flying overhead followed by a terrible explosion. I don't know who, but some mainland military must have decided to sink the ship. I could see it burning on the horizon. I'm guessing that word of the sickness spread to the outside world and they've decided to contain it here, before it reaches their inefficient public hospitals. I bet those socialist parasites on Objectopia called them in. If that's how they're going to operate, I'm glad they cut us free. At least this way they won't take what's mine after I die.

July 30, 139 AR: A pair of tugboats manned by crews in hazmat suits arrived today. I fear that this means that they'll sink us soon, but I am not afraid. The disease clearly has me and I will not live much longer. I believe that they mean to board us and take what they can before sinking us in deeper water. Serves them right, there's nothing of worth left here anyways. If any of them come up to the roof, I'll shoot a hole in their hazmat suit. Those goddamn parasites on the boat took anything that wasn't welded down before they left anyways.

August 1, 139 AR: I heard the sounds of jets and explosions just a bit ago, and we've stopped. I can see the haze of a massive fire beyond the horizon. I expect that will be the burning

remains of Objectopia. I am heartened to know that, in my final hours, that I am in the last truly free place on Earth.

I expect that we'll be sunk very shortly. The parasites in the hazmat suits came aboard and set down a heavy amount of what I assume to be explosives as they were scavenging. I tried to lift my pistol to shoot at them, but I was too weak. They didn't take much with them, but I hope that anything they take infects the whole rest of this rotten world.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. I was supposed to live the good life and have what I deserve. If all those god-damn parasites had just followed through on their contracts, none of this would have happened. Instead, I'm going to die out here on the ocean. I just wanted to be a captain of industry. If anyone finds and reads this, you can burn in hell.

Leviathan

By Azatoth

“They’ll be here in just a few hours.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You know what happened to Augustin City, right?”

“That’s why we’re evacuating. Too damn many of them to fight.”

Major Hawkins and Lieutenant Garcia stood at the dock, watching the shifting, buckling mass of Galt’s Drift edge inexorably closer to the city. It was a monstrous thing, floating on the water like a bloom of algae, only made of rusting metal. Thousands of interlocking pieces, all designed to flex and bend and shift to deal with whatever stresses the ocean could place on it. Uncountable numbers of shacks, tents, and shanties stood atop it, but the true bulk of Galt’s Drift lay beneath the water. It normally drifted with the currents, only using its propulsion systems to move against currents or to close quickly.

That was how they’d found out about it in the first place. A giant plume of black smoke, rising in the morning sun. A few fishing boats went out to investigate, all but one didn’t make it back. Hawkins prayed that the men and women on those boats were at the bottom of the sea right now, not in some slaver’s pen. The shot-up boat that did make it back reported that Galt’s Drift was heading for St. Albans as fast as they were able.

Word of their success must have gotten out. Now, the full granary, the mill and their docks were likely going to be destroyed and their machinery carted off. “At least all the remaining fishing boats had managed to put to sea, we won’t starve come winter,” Hawkins mused to Garcia. Most of the captains were heading up and down the coast, spreading news that Galt’s Drift was spotted. “I’m sure that when they’re done

with us, they'll head either up or down the coast. I can't believe they've brought the whole damn thing this close to shore."

Usually, raiders were sent out in fast boats, collecting slaves or provisions from coastal settlements or poorly defended ships. The occasional boat sunk, or family taken to slavery, regrettable, but something they could deal with. However, this was different, and that worried Hawkins more than the actual raid itself.

"They must be very low on supplies to risk raiding us like this," Major Hawkins said, though there was uncharacteristic uncertainty in his voice. "That damn thing may be nearly indestructable, but it'll be a bitch to get back to sea, once they're done..." His voice trailed off at the end. He didn't want to think about what would happen if they found their mountain caves. Not with his wife and kids holed up in there.

"Nothing we can do," the young lieutenant said. "The evacuation's well underway. We should be able to get everyone out in time." Hawkins turned to look at Garcia. She had the unfounded confidence of youth, though he wouldn't complain about that. Every moment he spent on the dock, watching Galt's Drift move towards them seemed to decrease his confidence in the future a little. He turned back and stared impassively at the roiling mass of metal slowly coming in on the tide.

"They'll destroy everything we've worked for." As he said this, Hawkins turned his back to the sea and stared dejectedly at the town. All the boats had gone out to sea once Galt's Drift was sighted heading towards land, but they couldn't move the houses or much of the heavy equipment. They'd only taken the absolute necessities to the caves. Only what they'd need to get through the winter and start over next year. He only hoped that they'd left enough behind so that the Drifters wouldn't get desperate and come looking for them.

"We could have rigged up some underwater mines, put them

out beyond the docks.”

“All it’d do is blow up the shacks on top and make them mad. That thing’s an engineering marvel. It could pass right through a category 5 hurricane and all that they’d lose is whatever is on top. If we’re lucky, we might take out a few sections, but there’s thousands more. All we’d do is make them thirsty for vengeance.” Hawkins took a final pause as he turned to face Galt’s Drift. “No, we’re doing the right thing, going to ground in the mountains.”

Some minutes passed as the two of them stood watch, staring at the inexorably approaching mass of steel. He could make out movement happening on the top of it, mostly indistinct. People scurrying around like rats. No doubt making final preparations for their raid. Hatred and fear roiled in his gut.

“We’ve waited as long as we can. Go give the signal. If we don’t go now, we might get caught if they launch their fast boats.” At that, the lieutenant turned and sprinted for the church. He saw her go in through the newly painted front doors, then heard the tolling of the bell seconds later. He watched as a few fishermen left at the docks quickly finished their gathering and made a hasty retreat south. Once he was sure everyone was out of town, Hawkins and Garcia would join them. With no one left in town, there’d be no one the Drifters could torture for information about their hiding places.

After several minutes of ringing, the lieutenant emerged from the church and jogged back to Hawkins. “Let’s make sure everyone’s out and then get to the truck,” Hawkins said nervously. “There can’t be anyone left in town when that damn thing gets here.”

“Yes, sir,” Garcia replied. They’d discussed this at length the previous day. They each knew which houses they needed to search and Hawkins wanted it done quickly. Every house he searched was empty. Hawkins breathed a sigh of relief as he completed his last search. He set off to the eastern part of

town, where he knew Garcia would be completing the last of her searches.

As he was walking to where he knew she would be, Hawkins heard the lieutenant call out to him from down the block. The hint of annoyance and fear in her tone made him suspect what had happened. Someone wasn't going to leave. "Damn it," Hawkins cursed under his breath. As he ran in the direction of her voice, Hawkins rounded the corner of a small house and saw the lieutenant standing with his back to him and Jack Cosgrove sitting in a chair on his front porch.

Sitting across Jack's lap was his hunting rifle. Gnarled and scarred knuckles clutched the aging weapon tightly. Jack used to be a fisherman down until his body gave out on him. Now, he mended nets and helped where he could. Hawkins had always been told that Jack could always locate the best fishing grounds, before his failing eyes had forced retirement.

"Jack, you need to leave," Hawkins called as he approached.

"No sir, I'm not leaving. I know they'll kill me, but that's okay. I'll take a couple of them out before they get me," Jack said, his voice wavering only slightly. Whether it was age or fear, Hawkins couldn't tell. "Maybe make 'em think that there's more waiting around. Buy you all a little more time to hide."

"I can't let you do that. If they capture you, they'll torture you until you tell them right where we're all hiding."

"I won't let that happen," Jack said, anger rising in his voice. His knuckles were now white as they clutched the rifle.

"You might not have a choice," Hawkins said as he drew his pistol. "Now, I'm going to ask you one more time to leave and go join the others in the caves."

"I won't leave. I was born in this town, I'm going to die here." The lieutenant watched in bewilderment as Hawkins raised his pistol and pointed it at Jack. Jack raised his rifle and pointed it at Hawkins.

"I'm going to ask you one last time to please join the others in the caves," Hawkins growled, adding as much menace as he could muster to his voice.

"No, I'm not going," Jack said resolutely. "Now, you all get to the truck. When you hear me shoot, you'll know they've made it this far."

"Damn it," Hawkins cursed. He looked into Jack's milky, blue eyes, searching for some sign that he could be persuaded to leave. He saw none. Hawkins grimaced, exhaled deeply, then pulled the trigger on his pistol. The bullet went through Jack's forehead. Bits of bone and brain matter sprayed the wall behind Jack. His body slumped in his chair. Hawkins walked up to Jack's body and retrieved the old rifle. He made a silent vow to give it to Jack's grandson when he got to the caves. As he turned, his eyes met the lieutenant's, she stood absolutely still, a look of horror and shock on her face.

Hawkins then realized that she'd likely never seen anyone shot before. "We need to go. Are there any more houses to search?" Long seconds ticked by before the lieutenant responded.

"Just two more, the two east of here on this side of the street." Her tone was flat as she spoke. Hawkins turned to go to the first house when the lieutenant stopped him. "Damn it, why didn't he just go?" Hawkins noticed that tears were streaming down her face, he felt tears on his cheeks as well. "He was at the meetings, he knew that we couldn't leave anyone behind."

"He knew the penalty for not leaving was death, but he's always been stubborn. He wanted us to stay and fight, once he heard what was happening. Maybe he didn't think I'd shoot..."

Hawkins trailed off as moved to search the last houses. The last two houses were empty. "I may not have been born here, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let anyone endanger this place."

The two of them walked in silence to where the last truck

out of town was waiting for them. Silent, sullen faces stared at them as they climbed into the bed of the truck. Hawkins signaled the driver as he turned to sit next to the lieutenant. Both sat and stared as Saint Albans receded from their vision.

A few miles out of town, they crested a hill and could briefly see the dock. Galt's Drift was very close to the docks, though he could curiously see no fast boats launching and no smoke rising from the propulsion systems.

He looked over at the lieutenant, the puzzled look on her face indicated that she was thinking about it as well. "Probably conserving their fuel, letting the tide take them in," he said with a shrug.

The lieutenant responded with a non-committal grunt and then the truck passed on the other side of the hill and Saint Albans passed from their view.

The Ice-Box

By Diesel_doc

January 1st, 2052

J My arrival at the Antarctic Offshore Station Galt-01 was the proudest moment of my life. We've finally done it! The perfect vision we have cultivated for so many years has been born and we are now liberated from our government oppressors. No longer will we be subject to the rules and regulations of all the nanny-states. I have never felt so free! My Powerball lottery winnings will be safe and untouched by the filthy poors I have left so many millions of miles away.

I thank the goddess Ayn Rand for her blessing of intuition that led me to buy all those tickets. My hard work and dedication to my cause payed off exponentially. Never has a person truly clawed their way to the top as I have.

April 12th, 2052

As I grow more accustomed to my new life here at Galt-01, I find myself loving it even more. I used my fortune to secure a top floor apartment in a high rise in the Rearden district. Not even the odd shudders from the high speed elevator could take the beaming smile from my face as I rode upwards to my new luxury dwelling.

I also threw my wallet's enormous weight around by purchasing the company that supplies electricity to my district. That took a considerable chunk out of my savings, but I fear not! The Free Market has provided me with the means to secure my wealth for decades to come.

September 22nd, 2052

If luck had played any part in my success so far, I would consider myself far luckier than some of the dregs I see moving into this paradise. They came with far less money than the best of us with the hope of making their fortunes in this frozen dream land. Simpletons. They make their pilgrimage to the Boyle slums where crime runs rampant. If only they had thought to plan ahead, they would have known to bring weapons. I never leave home without my dual .50 caliber pistols and I always remember to carry for katana as a backup.

There is an upside to all these lower class ‘people’ moving here. They provide we Captains of Industry with a cheap work force. The fools have saddled themselves with dependent families and they are pacified with a tiny stipend for their labors. They seem to be content to work for only enough to ensure their survival. Maybe they will strive to be able to buy my autobiography and learn how I vaulted myself to the top rung of society through hard work and strong business sense.

December 5th, 2052

Disaster struck last week at my power plant. A fusion generator went critical and blew the entire east bloc of the plant to hell. There was no power to the Rearden district for two days. I almost went crazy without the companionship of my beautiful holographic waifu. My neighbors were threatening me with violence until the president of the Rand Corporation stepped in and offered to buy me out. I graciously accepted his offer and the lights came back on within hours. They even posted guards at the entrance to my building to deter the protesting dependents of the workers that were killed. They quickly dispersed after a couple were gunned down.

I lament the loss of my power company, but the president of Rand is an upstanding member of our Free Market society. He will continue my empire in my stead.

January 1st, 2053

It's been 1 year since I started my new life off the coast of Antarctica, which is now called "The New Top of the World". We have made much progress over the course of this year. We have filled AOS Galt-01 to capacity. We are now 100,000 citizens strong. We have established our own food synthesizing facilities and are now 100% self-sufficient! We no longer even send boats to mainlands, only between stations.

There have been some hiccups lately, though. The Rand Corporation that bought out my power company has went on a purchasing streak since an enormous injection of capital established it as the most valuable company in all 5 of the Galt stations. All utilities have been purchased by them. They addressed the public shortly after buying the last water company, Taggart H2O, and stated that the merger of all utilities into 1 entity would help stabilize the market for everyone. I knew the president of Rand would come through. Our utility bills have increased by 15%, but Rand has to recoup its expenditures. The Free Market is working!

March 23rd, 2053

Things have taken an odd turn in the last month or so. Rand Corporation has demolished my precious power plant, my legacy. In its place they have erected a much larger building. The name on the front reads 'RAND-TEK MEDICAL RESEARCH AND TREATMENT FACILITY'. The fence they lined the perimeter with is gigantic and imposing, and for some reason they installed the razor wire toppler pointing inwards. The laborers must have been more concerned about getting home to their dependents than doing a proper job. Docked wages all around, I can only hope.

The time was right for a hospital to be constructed here at Galt-01. Some people weren't as quick to grow accustomed to the fully synthesized food and became sick. Most of the

laborers employed by my apartment building grew ill and had to be taken to the treatment facility. The building owners have not yet hired replacements for them. The elevator has become clunky in its operation, but as soon as Rand-Tek got the general laborers back on their lazy feet it would get fixed.

May 14th, 2053

There have been many wild rumors flying around the last few weeks! To begin, my building's maintenance laborers never came back from Rand-Tek. I was informed they became even sicker once they were admitted and had to be quarantined. Some say they are recovering, and some say they are dead. Not very interesting news, in my expert opinion.

Another rumor I heard was that the Rand Corporation had bought out all of the food synthesizer plants. I see no problem with this, as it is the true Free Market at work, but I cannot mask my jealousy towards its president. He is a true Captain of Industry.

The last rumor I caught wind of is possibly the strangest and most far-fetched of all. I heard whisperings that AOS Galt-04 had a catastrophic event and sank into the cold Antarctic waters. As I was told, it all started with a food riot that led to armed security guards at the food plants killing several laborers and their dependents. I was also told that there were many well-to-do members of the society partaking in the protest as well, but that was most likely just hearsay. Or heresy! From what I understand, the laborers and dependents fled back to their ghettos in the Boyle district. But they came back with automatic weapons and even some rockets! The story goes that the massive firefight that followed compromised Galt-04's foundation and it sank.

Things are not all bad though! Apparently my top floor neighbors were not the genius businessmen that I once believed them to be. They have all one by one lost their riches

and were forced out of the building. I took the opportunity to rent the available space and now I have the entire top floor to myself! It costs me nearly \$25,000 a month but I have more than enough money and it's definitely worth it. Praise be to Rand!

June 20th, 2053

I normally don't record my thoughts this often but too much has happened in this past month and I worry I might leave something out.

The elevator in my building broke. When I say broke, I mean the cable snapped and it plummeted 15 floors to the ground. Four of my neighbors will not be here to see the 2-year anniversary. The building owner lives on the 4th floor, but would not open the door when we went to question him about the elevator maintenance. We came back later that day and he had nailed a strange sign to his door. It read only: "FYGM". We have yet to decipher its meaning. Worst of all, I now have to climb 20 flights of stairs to get to my apartment! Two weeks ago I had to sleep in the stairwell of the 14th floor due to exhaustion.

There was yet another hike on our utility bills recently. A 20% increase! It's getting to the point where I actually have to ration my electricity consumption. Sometimes I even have to turn my lights off during the daytime and I regularly have to shut down my computer while I sleep. Rand Corp. has also announced their plan to increase synthesized food prices "slightly" next month. Ha! I heard from a loyal source that Cheeto prices were expected to triple. Good thing I keep such a healthy stock of those delicious orange sticks.

I was accosted on the street by a crazy 'person' a few days ago. He ran up to me and was on me so fast I was unable to draw neither my pistols nor my trusty katana. He grabbed my shoulders and screamed at me about his friend disappear-

ing and the voices he had been hearing. He then screamed “FYGM” and fell over in a heap. I hurried away and into a nearby holo-porn shop. I watched as 3 men dressed in some sort of protective gear came and collected the man. They stood for a long time and looked in the direction of the shop I was in. Holo-porn is a hard thing to resist, after all.

September 9th, 2053

I just returned from my trip to the Rand-Tek hospital. I was making my bi-weekly trip down my building’s stairs when I became dizzy and fell off the last three steps. The last three! If Rand Corp. wasn’t charging so much for synthesized food, I wouldn’t have to eat every other day. Anyway, I broke my left arm. The doctor explained to me that the necessary treatment for my arm would cost several hundred thousand dollars. I explained to him that I could eat every day for a month on that much money. He said I was in luck. They research facility adjoined to the hospital was performing experimental treatments for damaged bones and they were free to anyone participating in the program.

They gave me an injection of something that turned my veins to ice, but instantly relieved the pain in my arm. I was invited to pick up some small weights and I found that my arm had somehow mended back together in the two or so minutes since I was given the medicine. I even discovered that I was able to lift more than I normally could. I feel much stronger overall. I even feel more sexually potent. Waifu is in for a treat tonight!

Decembuary

Weird things are happening to me. I am losing track of time. Hours pass and I can’t remember what I have done or where I have gone. Everywhere I go, strange symbols dance in the corners of my vision. I see horrible demons walking down the

streets, yet when I blink my eyes they are just normal people. Sometimes my whole body burns like fire, and sometimes I feel like I have been thrown into the frigid ocean waters below us. I tried once to go back to Rand-Tek, but when I arrived it appeared as if the building was on fire! I can see it from my apartment window and it looks normal. Sometimes I think I am even losing track of time!

Liberation Day

I know now what I must do. I must shed this mortal form and ascend to my rightful place. The Goddess Ayn Rand is here in the room with me. She beckons me to finish my task and join her in the true Free Market. I will finish this, my personal history, so my place as a Captain of Industry will forever be recorded. I will take my katana in hand and fall upon it honorably like the noble Samurai of long ago.

To whoever finds this, grant me the one favor I have asked for in my life...

Bury me with my bootstraps.

Hurtling Into Darkness

By Pierson

Fragment recovered from the wreckage:

-TOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF LIBERTOPIA

9/11/20XX

Directors Present:

T. Rand, F. Rand, Y. Galt, R. Randpaul, A. Randaynpaul, Z. Galtpaulrand

Also Present:

T. Blake (Notary)

T. Rand called the meeting to order at approx. 11:39 Galt Standard Time. Approx because clocks have stopped days ago due to last clockmaker being executed for socialist tendencies (re; handing food to strikers). Blake recorded the minutes. A quorum of directors was present, and the meeting, having been duly convened, was ready to proceed with business.

Items of Agenda

1: Possible additions of numbers on last names to combat confusion due to immigrants to Libertopia changing names to variants of Rand, Paul, Galt. Motion approved. Suggested course of action is now only registered Captains of Industry may now assume titles of Her works, any common wage-slaves or contracted workers found using will be thrown from rig at earliest opportunity.

2: Discussed methods of breaking strike of cleaning facili-

ties on lower decks of the rig. Y. Galt suggested use of chemical solvents poured down from upper levels to discourage subversive actions such as striking, destroying machinery of industry, and breathing in a socialist manner. R. Randpaul suggested own rebreather factories would result in minimal loss of workforce. Motion approved.

3: A. Randaynpaul suggested abolition of traditional school reading of the The Galt Speech, as many work-hours lost per day and immigrant children complaining of muscle dystrophy due to having to remain standing and saluting Her photo for entirety of speech. Mr Randaynpaul subsequently led away for re-education and re-assignment to the Food and Waste Disposal Factory. We will see how he enjoys his liberal back-sliding in the shit farms!

4: Breakdown of electronics due to shortage of conducting materials on the rig due to workers mistaking shiny metal for Colloidal Silver and ingesting it, believing it to be miracle cure for common lung disease found in lower factories. Pleasing aesthetic change in worker's complexions but unfortunate health side-effects re; they are now dead. Suggested course of action paint metal in thin coat of uranium to discourage looting and eating.

5: Shortage of high-class whiskey and ice considered. Immediate suggestion of attacking nearby island-based Seastead 'Randland' carried unanimously after board reminded of rotten meat previously supplied by same Seastead in exchange for cargo of fruit. Also reminded their reply when informed of this and attempting to reverse trade: 'Fuck you, got yours too'.

6: Shortage of healthy workers leading to-

This is the last bug we pulled from the flotsam, Sal. We think due to where we found it floating it was probably the one from the boardroom itself, so that's a lucky break. I think we're done here, we've picked our men up and salvaged any civilians we can. We came across one of them in the water, sat on a golden throne just floating there on the wreckage, screaming about socialists and leeches. We offered to take him to land – hell, even a trial at the Hague is better than drowning/starving at sea right? – but he pushed us away. We just left him there, he seemed perfectly at home.

Anyway here's the only thing we could pull from the memory. We have no idea who these people were, just manchildren with trust funds who wanted to play at God. We've called them Voices A to D. I didn't bother to remember their names. I don't think anyone else will either.

Tape #7827, recovered from rig-wreckage:

A: -said order goddamnit! We were talking about- jesus what's that smell?

[Angry shouting as word 'Jesus' is uttered. Sound of hard wood hitting soft object, possibly a head. Voice A no longer heard on tape.]

B: Bloody stupid man. [Voice B notably intoxicated. Clinks and pouring can be heard throughout tape from all directions. Robert assures me this is the sound ice makes as it is dropped into whiskey glass. Wondering how he knows that so well.] We gotta- It's just the damn leeches is all, can't even fix a goddamn pipe. Safety contractor said it'd...it'd be extra to get rid of the smell. M'not payin. Workers we contracted said...said they weren't goin' down there again. Cowards af-

ffffraid of a little dirt.

C: You know I said we should bring out the guns to take care of those rats! They signed contracts goddamnit! We never said anything in them about not lowering wages whenever we wanted! They should have just read the damn thing more carefully!

[Murmuring of agreeable sounds. More clinks and pouring.]

D: Still gotta take care of the leaks though! Didn't we hire some guys from that other place to take of that strike? Where the hell did they go? We paid for those strikebreakers goddamnit!

C: They didn't turn up in the end. I told you I told you we shouldn't have paid them first, contract or no! I even tried to hire a security contractor to go across to the Seastead they came from and get the money back, but the boat sunk half-way there. Took half our gold with it!

B: [Slurring sounds as Voice B tries to enunciate words.] –s'told you all before you gotta...you gotta stick to your guns. Ain't got nothing if you don't have guns! [Sounds of pouring, weeping.] The precious guns.

C: Any more of that whiskey left? I'm dry.

B: S'last bottle here. I've got the...I'm a goddamn Captain of Industry. I'm a- [rest of tirade unintelligible.]

C: Share some of that good stuff.

[Long pause as word 'share' is spoken.]

D: Share the whiskey? You...d'you think this is socialist whiskey!?

[Clicking metallic sounds and shouting, followed by gunshots and long silence. Final words spoken minutes after argument.]

D: [Coughing, bleeding] For freedom! No masters!

[Sound of large explosions in the distance. Silence.]

We think one of them had a destruct button wired up and pressed it, either by accident or because he didn't want other people to use the rig after he died. They must have rigged the struts to blow because the entire thing went down like a stone. Secondary explosions took care of the rest of the rig. Whatever madness this was they believed it to the end, I'll give them that. Let's just go home. I don't even want to know what could be floating in this crap. There's nothing for us here.

This is How The World Ends

By Kraustofski

Two men sit at a table in a small room labeled “questioning” on the UN carrier ship Zeffiro II. A uniformed man and another leaning back in his chair lounging as much as one could in such an ordinary chair. There was an air of relief about him that you could almost feel it radiating from his sweaty ripped-up dress shirt and soiled khakis. A stringy, balding head to top it all off.

“I was determined, oh yeah, mostly because of the debts I owed - through the tunnel-vision of amphetamines I ended up coming to this last and only solution to my problems. My last and only way out of all this.”

The man who just spoke took a puff of blunt and winced as the rashes on his face tinged with an unearthly pain.

“... what can I say, a brain hooked on amphetamines does a lot of dumb shit. That’s where the debts came from and before that I was a normal guy in the US wanted for insider trading and a slew of other illegal activities on Wall Street, but hey that’s neither here nor there and those stories paint me in a shitty picture. Knowing you guys you probably already know about them anyway, so whatever...”

“Continuing then, I’d heard from many people of the somewhat zany founders of this big trash-heap you just liberated me from, libertarians with an eye for a free market paradise or some shit. Libertalia, libertopia, Randland, Atlantis, Atlas City, whatever. I’ve never heard one concise name throughout my time here. Had been the barking mad idea of a few libertarians, you know, the type obsessed with gold and shit. One of the original founders, some Rand Kelly guy, had built

a huge tower for him and his buddies that shows well over the slums and pollution below it even today.

“The guy was rich, young and new rich- not smart or educated. Inherited all of it thanks to some lucky fuckin’ glitch. After helping start this city he and some others threw their money into the monstrosity that became “Rand Tower”, the crowning jewel to the aptly named Rand Plaza and Ayn Rand Memorial Boulevard. Yeah I know the Ayn Rand shit gets kinda tiring after a while, they could’ve come up with better names I guess.”

“With the rest of his fortune Kelly took out a shitton of loans and spent the rest of his fortune on gold. Yeah, that’s right, all gold. Besides hoping people would trust their money with him in his tax-free paradise he foretold of a time when USD and even EU money would be so inflated as to be useless. Needless to say, neither of those things happened.”

“When the city didn’t end up the free-market paradise of his dreams and his rich friends abandoning him after the first big storm the big baby locked himself away in his ruined tower, it continued being a wrecked half-built ruin. What? you thought I was describing a tower built in a land with building codes and regulations? You think a place like this could even produce a tower on the size or scale of Rand tower and not manage to fuck it up somehow? You’d be fucking dumb if you thought that.”

“The storms battered the tower and broke most of the paneled windows. Guts from it lay strewn across the small courtyard and the half-baked buildings/districts surrounding it (all those ended up being uninhabitable and prone to collapse, explains why nobody lives near it). The whole thing creaks and moans if the wind picks up on a good day, horrifying noises.”

The man puts down his smoke and takes a gulp of coffee, breathing a sigh before continuing.

“That eccentric ruler of a tower must have watched as one by one his still filthy rich buddies left him in the dust with all his gold in that ruined thing. Years later nobody has ever set foot inside of it, least nobody who has lived or talked about it anyway. That’s the part where I come into all of this: After hearing the story a few times from other debtors around me I decided to throw my lot in with lady luck one more time-”

“-I knew from that moment I was gonna steal from that lonely bastard. Sensing the coming of withdrawals from the fucking supermeth I’d been taking like crazy this sounded like a fucking grand idea at the time. The place was empty, what was I gonna lose? The gold still had to be in there somewhere... people would have mentioned it if somebody had gone and done what I had planned to do already. I mean come on- nobody has fucking heard from inside there in years...”

The man slouched forward in his chair and crossed his arms on the table, putting his tired looking head onto them.

“...and so began my shit-filled adventure of burglarizing Rand tower.”

“I didn’t assemble some crack team, didn’t get any supplies, didn’t do shit to prepare me for what I was about to do. At the time I felt I could take whatever was being thrown at me, mostly thanks to the drugs I was quickly running out of.”

The man closed his eyes and thought a minute before continuing.

“It began with the toll booth gangs. Rand tower was in the middle of this huge shitthole and I was on the edge of it. If I wanted to get any further in I’d eventually encounter ‘trolls’ as they called them. No, not named after some dumb internet meme, like out of the damn children’s story. Except these trolls aren’t mythical fairy tale nonsense they’re crazy people with guns who need money NOW. There’s no other way re-

ally, between them and the people claiming to give you 'safe passage' through the different districts and you realize you're gonna get sponged or murdered eventually. Dead or broke, which one that was came up to you, things only got worse after that crazy bitch stopped making them obey rules."

"I had a not so novel idea to get past them, same way the welders and other weirdos get from district to district- either by the crowded accidental canals or by actually walking under and around the bases of the platforms themselves. The trash and sludge had compacted in a lot of areas enough to allow some leeway for travel... but it sure as hell wasn't safe down there. Without any options and being quite clearly broke that's the only way I could take. And judging by my being here in front of you right now you know I took it, hell you can still smell it on me I bet. Years and years of shit and piss and trash and.."

"Sorry to cut you off but could you continue please without the distractions?"

"Ah, right, ok, sorry Mr. Official. So I took the shit paths, hopping and jumping from platform to platform and hugging the sides of boats and wrecks welded to even more plats. You'd be amazed how temporary a lot of these things are, weren't for the larger structures inland they'd just float right away at times. Sometimes there were maintenance type walkways welded to the sides of the plats to make it easier to get from one point to another- a sure sign the welders have been working around a district for considerable amounts of time.

"Only way I knew I was going the right direction was by looking up in the distance and seeing bits of the tower getting closer. Some people offered to ferry me closer in return for things like my watch, my belt, silly shit. Hell I had a pair of sunglasses and somebody wanted them bad enough to ferry me a good half of the way. Guy was named Waymond, salvager of some sort looking for 'bits of treasure' in the murky wa-

ters he patrolled. Treasure, it seemed, was dead bodies with jewelry and other useful stuff on them. I distinctly remember him pointing to a large rust-stained object hooked on some rebar from a plat and saying “I’m gonna come back for that one when you get off, its one of them dargun bodies. Useful shit in there for a guy who knows how to sell parts.” thing was fucking gross looking... could swear there was some brownish brain material hanging out of what I assume was its head. Anyway sorry yeah moving on I see you staring at me now, I hate that.”

“I parted with Waymond and made my way topside as I reached Ayn Rand Boulevard, place was a mess but actually had some artificial streets instead of open pits and plank-ing as dividers between plats. Strangely it felt like they were moving a lot less too. Unfinished lightposts and empty husks of collapsed and half collapsed buildings lined the original plats while larger structures like great cargo ships and huge corporate boats lined the docks. They were kinda landlocked now after all this time, but the companies on them still ran is if they weren’t. It wasn’t a good idea to stick about here long, I’d wandered into the synth quarter. Where some of the bio-tech startups lived. Those guys never rubbed me right.”

“Quickly getting the fuck out of there I darted through more crowded streets. The scars of fighting seemed more apparent here than in other places, large holes and signs of rampant fires dotted every other building around here. This, from what I’d always heard in the meth district, was no-man’s alley. Some dumb captains of industry had fought over it to demonstrate their weapons or something while people were actually still living in it. People still lived in it now, but there were a lot more ruined huts amongst the sprawling new ones. Those streets I described ended and began in a lot of the wrong places because they’d simply built right on top of them when their shit got wrecked. No regulations meant no-

body gave a shit if you covered the main roadways in shanty villages and large corporate construction projects. Toll troll gangs were not common here because of all the fighting, but as night fell I came to remember why they weren't very common here..."

"I barely avoided the red-pointer of a laser guided rifle round and ducked back under the plats. I'd be staying here for now, hiding in a gutted and half submerged water tank welded to the side of a populated plat. As long as I kept myself in here the night things wouldn't snipe me for being out after night-fall. No idea what those things are, I just remembered then why they told people not to come out at night in districts like this, especially by yourself. That night I froze like a fucking sinner in hell with my clothing ending up the way it was. I wished many times I still had my watch to see when the night would fucking end because it was also then that I took my last pills to keep me up and running."

"Morning came, I got the fuck out of that damn tank of what turned out not to be drinking water but stored urine and made my way through the tangled streets of the boulevard. Went on for what felt like forever through those crowded streets and noted that eventually the crowds were thinning out more and more. I'd now hit the once aptly named "malaria district", part of the very original construction. There was a workers riot or something back before Rand tower was a husk and it was here that it was put down. The riot was caused by the sick and the dying of a large spectrum of the original third world immigrants and ended up making the place have bad memories for all involved, well, that and nobody wanted to live in a place where that dreadful form of sickness lived- hence Malaria district. Sick people are sometimes dumped here as well as harvested by the genetics people. It was kinda like a ring of sparsely populated ghost towns surrounding Ayn Rand Plaza, a buffer of sorts. Past the plaza was where I wanted to

be, the Rut, and then finally the tower.”

“I skipped the plaza. It was booming with business and I didn’t want to go through it... no, not safe. I was wanted there for sure by now. Posters and shit were already up where I came from and if they knew the plaza surely knew already. I’ve got a most wanted blood type too so it made hunters more likely to want to find me. Pretty bad situation, so I skipped the plaza and took the long way around, through The Rut.”

“The Rut is a literal gaping hole next to the plaza the size of a very large ship. That’s because there actually was one there at one time, some big corp I don’t care to remember, thing sank for some reason and took a lot of plats with it. Story says the welders worked night and day to release the rest of the platforms from it- boring shit moving right along. The Rut then gave me a safe passage to the buffer zone around the very tower itself. These plats were larger and much stronger than any of the rest, but at the same time they managed to be the least safe. They’re used as anchors by the rest of the island. Civilization exists on them but they’re mostly inhabited by the ruined hulks of the largest failed construction project ever known to this place- The Resort.”

“Oh my god yes you heard me right, a fucking resort. Some guy thought it would go great to have a resort surrounding Rand tower. It was supposed to attract normal people to come live here, it never got completed. The storms made sure of that. The storms also revealed the shoddy construction of the whole damn thing. The plats were recycled oil rigs and their parts, stripped down to hug the water better, anchored to the sea floor and even reaching it in some parts they say. The resort is full of the same unsafe shit that the rest of this place is, don’t go out a night and don’t hang out in the open too often. Same failed district planning all around as the resort quickly became slum and huge gaping holes showed up in a lot of the not well maintained oil-rig plats. I avoided a lot

of trouble in the resort when I luckily managed to see some manbaggers in the far distance looking most likely for me. I'd be able to pay them off when and if I got the gold of course."

"I know you're being patient with me here so stay calm I'm getting to the meat of it. I eventually ended up at the big ol' barrier wall surrounding the tower. It was lifeless, none of the guard stations appeared manned that's for sure. Hell a kind of deadness surrounded the whole place and I kind of expected the stories of the place being uninhabited to be some kind of dumb joke. But no... the place looked empty, just like they all said, lifeless. When I found a kind of above-ground tunnel opening into the courtyard connection a large reinforced gate battered by what would appear years of storms and rust ravaging it stood in my way. I took my chances and kicked the gate in finding it to actually be not only unlocked but propped up in a way, thing fell off hinges attached, welds hadn't held it looked like."

"What greeted me was a completely empty looking courtyard devoid of life. Some sun chairs here and there, some gaudy Atlas statuary, holes in the plat and panels missing, dead planters... some trees, broken plastic and glass everywhere. Odd splotches and black stains all over the place. Not much different from the rest of the place minus the huge crowd of people. Stylistically it pretended to be that of some professional, on-land style environment. Trying to pretend it wasn't something built on top of a floaty-thing in the middle of the goddamn ocean. So, I was here and the entrance lay just a good few meters ahead of me. The tower loomed above it all looking even worse up close... covered in rust and what looked like years of water as well as smoke damage. The top looked like an uncontrollable fire had broken out in a lot of places though that could just be the pollution doing that.

Either way, I was finally there."

Burning Bridges

By El Samayo Grande

From UNHCR Report 2043-39:

The passage to the ex-slaves' citadel was one of the few channels through the Scab that was clear and easily navigable. Narrow, and surrounded by mines, only small boats could enter, so we debarked into tenders and headed in. Even though they knew we were coming, with our UN flags waving, the cannons on the towers tracked us the entire way in. The broad pier was a drastic contrast to any other entrance to Libertalia, swept clean well maintained. No garbage was in sight. A few of the guardsmen jumped to grab our mooring ropes and expertly tied us in.

Standing at the dock waiting for us was a small group of brown men, the Council of Elders, wearing neatly-pressed suits, holding garlands. The first, a balding man of around 45 years of age, was Bahiruddin Chatterjee, the Eldest of the Council. Smiling broadly, he placed his garland over Colonel Jackson and introduced us to the remaining members.

"Come come, we must go inside, and we need your boats." As we left, a line of women and children, neatly dressed and clutching folders with paperwork were led onto our tender and departed for our ships. "It's necessary to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Pirates, you know."

As we entered through the gates, we saw a forest of solar panels, casting shade over the rows of carefully-tended hydroponics. Chatterjee proudly pointed out the softly purring desalinization plant, the largest on the raft "and the only free one!" he said.

Small brightly-painted dormitories, expertly built of wood

and tiles, surrounded us, filled with “contract-breakers” waiting to go home. Chaterjee occasionally paused, speaking to them in Spanish, Hindi, Tagalog, or Yoruba” They’ve just arrived, and it’s hard for them to understand how things work here - From each according to his ability, to each according to his need - I believe that was your John Smith”

Entering his office, he poured us tea, and told us about the history of the encampment.

Like many others, I came at the best of the recruiters, spreading stories of the wealth a man could make in Libertia. I chose it over Dubai, because I loved the ocean. At first, I was put to work on a construction crew, hard work but they fed us well and paid us our pittance in dollars, so I could send some home to my mother. Then the developer went bankrupt, something about leveraged debt, and we, I mean “our contracts”(his smile turned dark at this point) were parceled off and sold. I ended up working for a fat American, Bradford Sinclair, who sat at his computer all day and played some game, called Gold Farming. I tried to keep the place clean, but my main responsibility was to go to the market and buy more food, preferably Cheetos (always the hardest to find). He never paid me, always coming up with another debt to pay off, and then snickered about how I should never negotiate with a captain of industry like himself. Even if he did pay, it was in those worthless Bitcoins

“One day he went with me to the market, but headed to the Thai ping-pong show instead. On our way back, high on some drug or another, he pulled out his pistol, some disgusting gold-inlaid giant thing, and proceeded to shoot at another laborer. His aim was so bad, the other man escaped, but I was shocked. I protested, but he pointed the gun at me and said ‘I lose out if I shoot you, but he’s someone else’s property. Fuck You Got Mine”

“That night, fed up with my lack of payment and poor treat-

ment, I took matters into my own hands. I grabbed his precious japanese sword and slashed him across the neck as he lay in bed. I grabbed what I could and ran, his gun, his ammunition, and as many cans as possible. The cheetos I left for the rats. I went to the next house, where I knew the servants were treated as badly, and we killed their masters as well. A Securi-Corp car spotted us, checked their client list, and dropped flyers on the ground saying "Next time, hire Securi-Corp!".

"We soon grew to 50, and needed a place to stay. We found this place, a mansion abandoned by its builders as soon as the first storm hit. We occupied it, armed it, and soon many others escaped and found their way to us. Soon, we had the resources to start hiring boats, and sent as many of us home as we could. It's been 15 years now, and no matter how many ridiculous attacks the Randians make, they're never organized enough to deter us from our mission.

I looked back to the dock, and saw that our tenders had returned, and filled up with more refugees. Soon, we would be able to load all 3,243 onto our fleet and get them home.

"How long until you destroy this place?" Chatterjee asked.

"Who needs us to destroy it?" replied Col. Jackson.

Exit Stage Right

By Kraustofski

“Mistah Galt? He dead, p sure anyway. As for da rest of ‘em... eh.”

“Any confirmation on that, are you sure its Mr. Kelly?”

“Yeah mon’ no fuckin’ way the sleazebag survived dis long. He never come out of dat Rand tower so its obvious mon; guy’s dead. And nobody go towards da inner financial district anymo’, one of the few roads to Ayn Rand Memorial B. Only real road to the building.”

“Ok so the other original investors, they still around?”

“Nope. The rich ones like Sharrone, Welsley, Friedman, they pulled the fuck out after the first two tropical storms. Guess they didn’t like the environment. There was like 30 of ‘em or so and I used to be able to recite all their names... they were big money ‘round here.”

“But some stayed?”

“Oh yeah, to the detriment of everybody else they did. The first 30 invited their ‘friends’ from the USA, crazy fuckin’ gun toting nutbags. A lot of those Randian fucks are still mucking about in the hell districts. They worked in the districts surrounding Rand tower while it was still stable to work there. Things really picked up when the pharmaceutical start ups and wackjob scientists moved in, then the piracy and the peep trade... story is history from there.”

“Alright so none of the original investors survive?”

“There’s been rumors that one or two live... but those get real fucked up mon’. No need for me to be havin’ nightmares tonight.”

This is the way Libertaria ends

This is the way Libertaria ends

This is the way Libertaria ends

Not with a bang but a whimper

By Dethkon